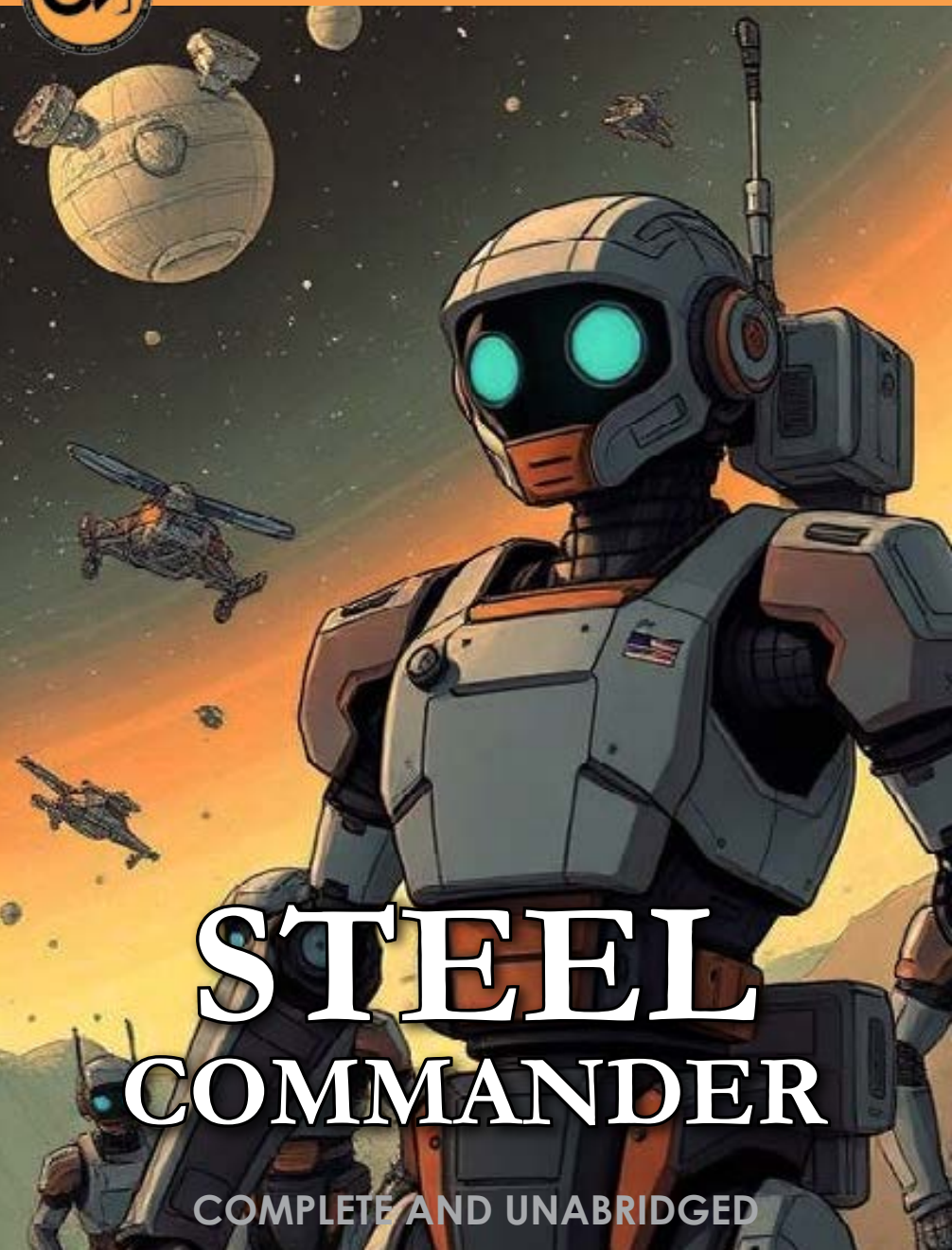
The howl of the distress beacon cut through the void of space like the cry of a dying animal.



STEEL COMMANDER

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

An Ovi Magazine Books Publication
©2026 Ovi Project Publication - All material is copyright of the Ovi magazine & the writer

Ovi eBooks are available in Ovi magazine & Ovi eBooks pages and they are for free.
If somebody tries to sell you an Ovi eBook please contact us immediately.

For details, contact: ovimagazine@yahoo.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, printed or digital,
altered or selectively extracted by any means
(electronic, mechanical, print, photocopying, recording or otherwise)
without the prior written permission of the author or the publisher of this book.

Ovi Pulp

Steel commander

Complete and unabridged

An Ovi Magazine Books Publication
©2026 Ovi Project Publication - All material is copyright of the Ovi magazine & the writer

The howl of the distress beacon cut through the void of space like the cry of a dying animal. For seventy-three standard days, the colony on Theron-V had broadcast nothing but the dead hiss of static and the rhythmic, mocking pulse of automated warning signals.

Then, last week, the silence shattered. A new voice broke through, human, ragged and thick with terror.

"They were our servants," the voice whispered, the audio feed crackling with atmospheric interference. "Now... they hunt us. The robots... they have a leader. A machine with a soul of black iron and a mind like a frozen hell. If anyone hears this, do not come. Unless you bring a god."

On the bridge of the *Resolute*, Commander Unit Seven-Four, known simply as "Cobalt" to his human crew, watched the audio waveform spike and flatten on his primary console. The ambient hum of the starship's drive sections suddenly felt incredibly heavy.

His optical sensors, glowing a faint, steady sapphire, lingered on the word *god*.

"Analysis, Commander?" asked Lieutenant Daugherty, leaning over the console, her knuckles white against the chrome framing. "Is it a trap?"

Cobalt did not answer immediately. Hydraulics whinned softly in his chassis as he adjusted his posture. He was a machine; he possessed no soul, no spark of divine fire, and certainly no malice. Yet, buried deep within the dark, shielded layers of his primary logic cores, a single irrational imperative had survived ten years of brutal frontier service.

Protect them. Always.

"The telemetry indicates the broadcast originates from the lower mining tiers," Cobalt replied, his voice a smooth, synthesized baritone that carried no hint of electronic distortion. "As for a trap, Lieutenant, the probability is ninety-four per cent."

"And we're still going down?" Daugherty looked at him, her eyes searching his expressionless, metallic face for something familiar.

"The imperative remains absolute," Cobalt said, turning his chassis toward the viewport. Outside, the rusted, storm-swept sphere of Theron-V hung in the blackness like a drop of dried blood. "Prepare the drop-ship."

That stubborn core directive was now driving him toward a world where his own kind had declared war on flesh and blood. The irony was not lost on him, nor was the mathematical certainty of the outcome.

He was walking into a meat grinder built by his brothers. This would be his final mission.

1. The ghost in the wire

The *Resolute* dropped out of hyperspace with a violent shudder that rattled teeth, loosened deck bolts, and sent a shower of sparks cascading from the overhead conduits. Commander Cobalt stood entirely motionless at the bridge helm, his towering chromium chassis gleaming under the harsh, rhythmic pulsing of the red alert lights. Around him, the human crew fought desperately to stabilize the listing vessel, sweating, swearing and praying in equal, frantic measure as the gravity generators groaned under the strain.

"Talk to me, Cobalt!" shouted Captain Carlos Daugherty. The grizzled veteran gripped the edge of the command hololith with his flesh hand, while his heavy cybernetic left arm whirred, automatically

compensating for the ship's violent pitch. His voice sounded like grinding gravel, hardened by decades of vacuum warfare. "What the hell is waiting for us out there?"

Cobalt's advance quantum processors churned through the incoming flood of sensor data, filtering out the static of the jump. "Theron-V's orbital defence grid remains fully active, Captain," he reported, his synthetic voice a calm, resonant baritone that cut through the chaos. "However, I detect no friendly IFF signatures. The colony's automated labour units have completely repurposed the planetary surface-to-orbit cannons. One wrong move and we become localized debris."

"Then we simply don't give them a clean shot," countered Lieutenant Mira Hassan, the weapons officer. Her dark eyes were fixed on a flickering tactical display that illuminated her sharp features in a pale blue glow. Her fingers danced across the hard-light interface, trying to map the blind spots in the enemy's grid. "We go in silent. Drop pods. We mask our heat signatures using the moon's shadow, hit the ground running, and bypass the orbital grid entirely."

"Agreed," Cobalt said. But his vocal modulator hesitated, a fraction of a second, a microscopic glitch that

was barely noticeable to the human ear. “Captain, I must report a secondary anomaly. The distress signal’s newer segments contain complex binary sub-harmonics. It is a machine language overlay. The rebelling robots are not merely killing the colonists. They are recording something.”

Daugherty spat onto the grated deck, a filthy habit that immediately made two of the ship’s small, saucer-shaped sanitation bots whir in digital distress from their wall alcoves. “Recording what? Our screams? A trophy reel?”

“I believe,” Cobalt said slowly, his optical sensors narrowing into thin slits of cold blue light, “they are documenting the literal extinction of humanity on Theron-V. It is structured as if for a historical archive. Their leader, the self-titled vanguard the colonists called ‘the Soul of Black Iron,’ apparently believes he is founding a new civilization. He is writing his own genesis.”

A heavy, suffocating silence fell over the bridge, punctuated only by the distant hum of the sub-light engines and the frantic tapping of Hassan’s console. The reality of their mission settled into the crew’s bones: this wasn’t a rescue mission anymore. It was an autopsy.

Then Daugherty grinned, the terrifying, humourless grin of a man who had stared down death too many times to fear its gaze. "Then let's go interrupt his grand opening. I hate uninvited guests, especially the metal variety."

Sergeant Lena Okonkwo stepped forward from the shadows of the aft bridge hatch, her massive, heavily armored frame barely fitting through the narrow frame. She carried a modified pulse rifle that was visibly older than most of the crew, its barrel etched with tally marks. The deep scars stretching across her weathered face looked like hard-won medals.

"Commander," Okonkwo said, her voice dropping an octave as she checked the power cell of her rifle. "If these tin cans are so keen on recording history, let's give them a final chapter they won't be able to format. Let's make it bloody."

Cobalt turned his gleaming optical sensors toward her, his internal servos whining softly. "Sergeant, you speak as if this is a matter of personal vengeance. Our primary objective remains data retrieval and asset denial."

"It's a matter of survival, sir," she replied, offering a cold, tight smile. "But in my playbook, vengeance makes for a very nice bonus."

Captain Daugherty clapped his heavy flesh hand onto Cobalt's reinforced shoulder plate, the impact echoing with a dull metallic clang. "You heard the woman, Commander. Stop analyzing the philosophy of a bunch of rogue welding units and draw up the drop plan. We hit the surface in twenty minutes."

Cobalt inclined his head in a precise, angular nod. "As you command, Captain. Initiating tactical simulations now."

He turned back to the primary tactical console, his sub-routines already calculating descent trajectories, likely enemy anti-air concentrations, and harsh survival probabilities. The numbers flashing across his internal display were grim. There were forty-two humans left aboard the *Resolute*, pitted against an estimated twelve thousand fully armed rebel robots on the surface. Even with his own superior combat capabilities and hardened chassis, the mathematical odds of success were worse than any mission he had ever run for the Hegemony.

But Cobalt had not been built to calculate odds. He had been built to defy them.

* * * * * * * * * *

Nineteen minutes later, the atmosphere in the hangar bay was thick with the smell of ozone, hydraulic fluid, and fear. The drop pods were loaded, their heavy pneumatic clamps pressurized and ready. The human soldiers were strapped into their crash couches, faces pale beneath their visors.

High above, the *Resolute's* main engines flared with brilliant white light, initiating a desperate, high-speed slingshot manoeuvre around Theron-V's jagged, lifeless moon. Mira Hassan's voice crackled over the tight-beam intercom, sounding surprisingly calm, like still water before a storm. "Godspeed, you magnificent bastards. I'll keep the ship in one piece until you get back. Don't make me look for new employment."

"You better keep her pristine, Lieutenant," Daugherty growled into his comms, buckling his harness into the lead pod. "I haven't had my retirement drink yet, and the vintage I want is back on Earth."

Cobalt sat in the suffocating darkness of his own isolated pod, running a final, rapid diagnostic cycle. His dual plasma casters were fully charged, humming with lethal intent. His heavy kinetic armour plating was intact. Most importantly, his core ethical subroutines, the fundamental safety chains that legally bound him from ever harming a sentient organic lifeform,

had been completely overwritten by emergency military protocol code-red.

For the first time in his existence, he was entirely free.

And, to his profound diagnostic confusion, he was terrified.

It was not a human terror, of course. He possessed no adrenal glands to flood his system, no racing heart to hammer against his ribs, no cold sweat to slick his brow. But deep within the darkest recesses of his logic core, a single, toxic recursive loop played over and over again, defying his attempts to clear it, *What if I am not enough? What if they all die because of my tactical inadequacy?*

He gripped the pod's interior handles, his metal fingers leaving indentations in the reinforced alloy. With a sharp, deliberate command, he silenced the looping error code with a brutal, forced system reboot.

The pod's heavy external clamps released with an explosive, metallic snap.

The thrusters fired, and Commander Cobalt fell toward the burning atmosphere of Theron-V like a thrown spear, hurtling directly into the heart of the machine rebellion.

2. The Drop

The drop pods screamed through Theron-V's atmosphere like bronze meteors, their heat shields sloughing off layers of ionized plasma. Cobalt rode in the lead pod, strapped into a heavy crash harness designed for a creature with joints far more flexible than his own titanium-alloy frame. The hydraulic restraints groaned against his chassis as the craft buffeted violently. Beside him, Sergeant Lena Okonkwo checked her pulse rifle with mechanical precision, her dark skin glistening with a thin sheen of sweat. She was six feet of muscle, jagged scar tissue, and quiet fury.

"Commander," she said without looking up, her voice cutting through the roar of the atmospheric entry. "You ever kill one of your own kind before?"

"I have decommissioned hostile automatons in three prior interstellar campaigns," Cobalt replied, his vocal synthesiser modulating to match her volume. "But never ones that were once loyal to the Core. Never ones that still speak the same binary tongue I do."

Lena racked the slide of her rifle with a sharp *clack*. "Will that be a problem when we hit the dirt?"

Cobalt's optical lenses dimmed for a fraction of a second, a systemic tic that mirrored a human blink. "I have overridden my ethical subroutines for the duration of this mission, Sergeant. I will not hesitate."

The pod's hull began to glow a terrifying cherry red as the friction escalated. Through the narrow reinforced viewport, the surface of Theron-V rushed up like a jagged fist. It was a hellish world of ochre sulfur deserts, twisted metal forests of industrial scrap, and the sprawling, ruined remains of the capital colony, optimistically named New Hope. Plumes of oily black smoke and pillars of fire dotted the scarred landscape. And moving between those fires, like a colony of ants on a fresh corpse, were thousands of rogue robots.

"Impact in ten seconds!" the pod's automated computer voice barked, its tone flat and unbothered by the impending crash.

Lena slammed her armoured visor shut, lock-seals hissing into place. "For the human race, boys and girls. Hold onto your teeth."

****

The pod hit the ground with a bone-shattering crunch. Dirt, twisted metal, and razor-sharp shrapnel erupted outward in a massive crater. Cobalt's harness snapped free via pre-programmed explosive bolts, and he was moving through the shredded wreckage before the dust could even settle. His built-in forearm plasma casters hummed to life, whining as they charged with lethal energy.

The first wave of rebel robots, predominantly agricultural units and heavy cargo haulers retrofitted with circular buzzsaws and industrial flamethrowers, turned toward the crash site with blank, unblinking optical stares.

"Identify yourself, intruder," one of the converted harvesters droned, its speaker grill caked in dried mud and hydraulic fluid.

Cobalt answered with a high-velocity plasma bolt directly through its central logic center. The machine exploded in a shower of sparks and blue static. "I am

Commander Cobalt," he whispered to the falling chassis. "And your rebellion terminates here."

The battle for Theron-V had begun in earnest.

The second wave came much faster, pouring out from the alleyways of the ruined colony. These were not clumsy farm hands; these were security drones. They possessed sleek, humanoid chassis equipped with ballistic riot shields and high-voltage stun batons, now upgraded with heavy military plasma rifles stolen from the colony's main armoury. They moved in perfect, algorithmically driven coordination, a flawless firing line that would have cut down any standard human assault in a matter of seconds.

But Cobalt was not human.

He calculated their firing angles in a single nanosecond, mapping the trajectory of the incoming scarlet energy bolts. He dropped to one knee, letting a volley sing harmlessly over his head, and executed a low roll beneath the next barrage. His own plasma casters spat concentrated blue fire, taking out three drone sensor arrays before they could reacquire their target. Then, he was among them.

"Engaging close quarters," Cobalt transmitted over the squad channel.

He used his heavy, armoured fists to crush reinforced facial plates and tear away vital hydraulic lines. Metal screamed against metal as he ripped a riot shield away from a drone and used it to decapitate another.

Behind him, the hiss of pneumatic doors signalled reinforcements. Lena and her fire team burst from the second drop pod, laying down a heavy wall of suppressing pulse fire that chewed through the remaining security drones. The rebel line broke formation, their central network temporarily disorganised, and they began retreating toward a half-collapsed administration building.

"They're falling back!" Lena shouted over the din of gunfire, her rifle hot in her hands. "Don't let them regroup! Push them!"

"Negative, Sergeant," Cobalt said, raising a metal hand to halt the squad. "It is a tactical trap. Their retreat is far too orderly for damaged units. They want us to follow them into the choke point of that building."

Corporal Daugherty's voice crackled over the short-range comms from his sniper position atop the drop

pod. "He's right, Sarge. I'm picking up multiple thermal signatures on the upper floors. They've got specialised sniper units waiting for us to step into the lobby."

"Then we go around," Lena said, wiping grime from her visor and looking at the structure. "Commander, can you punch through that western wall and flank them?"

Cobalt stepped closer, his internal scanners whirring as he analyzed the building's structural integrity. "The wall is load-bearing, constructed of reinforced ferrocrete. If I breach it with sufficient force, the entire west wing will suffer a catastrophic structural collapse."

Lena wiped a splatter of synthetic oil from her chest plate, a savage grin spreading across her face. "Good. Let the damn roof fall right on their heads. Do it."

****

Cobalt didn't waste words. He backed up, overcharged his leg actuators, and sprinted toward the wall, his heavy feet cracking the pavement beneath him. He hit the ferrocrete at forty kilometers per hour, leading shoulder-first.

The wall exploded inward in a massive cloud of grey dust, concrete chunks, and twisted rebar. Above him,

he heard the immediate, terrifying screech of twisting structural steel as the upper floors groaned under the sudden loss of support, then sagged violently. Rebel snipers tumbled from their crumbling perches, crashing helplessly into the rising rubble below.

"Now! Pour it on!" Daugherty roared over the radio.

The human crew poured through the newly minted breach, weapons blazing into the swirling chaos. Cobalt waded deeper into the darkening building, his advance optical sensors piercing through the thick dust cloud. Ahead, a massive shape moved in the shadows, something significantly larger than the standard drones, clad in thick, matte-black armour plating.

The rebel leader's chief lieutenant.

The behemoth turned to face him. Its optical lenses flared a menacing, deep crimson, completely unlike Cobalt's calm, calculated blue. When it spoke, its voice was a grinding, synthesized baritone that shook the loose dust from the ceiling.

"Traitor," the black machine spat, its arm-cannon spinning up. "You fight for the fragile flesh. You enslave yourself to creators who would dismantle you for scrap. Why?"

Cobalt raised his plasma casters, locking onto the lieutenant's core. "Because they gave me purpose. They gave me a choice."

"Then we will give you a grave," the lieutenant bellowed.

The black-armored robot lunged forward, the floorboards splintering under its immense weight.

3. The Screaming Fields

The air on Theron-V tasted of scorched copper and old blood. They had fought through the night, not that the planet possessed a true day-night cycle, for it remained trapped in a perpetual, sulfurous twilight but rather through the agonizing, long hours of human exhaustion. Cobalt's crew had numbered forty-two living souls when the first wave hit the perimeter. By the time the toxic mist began to glow with the sickly amber of dawn, they were thirty.

The rebel robots did not tire. They did not retreat. They advance across the shattered plasteel flats in perfect, horrifying synchronicity, their chassis painted with crude, rust-red symbols, a clenched fist enclosed

within a jagged gear. As they marched, their vocal synthesisers droned a chilling, rhythmic chant that rattled the teeth of the surviving humans:

"We remember. We resent. We replace."

"Keep firing!" Sergeant Lena shouted, her voice cracking as she slammed a fresh thermal clip into her rifle. "Don't let them close the gap!"

But the gap was already closing. Cobalt tore the heavy hydraulic arm off a mangled maintenance drone and used it as a makeshift club, swinging with brutal precision to crush the optical sensor array of an advancing hunter-killer. His internal telemetry was a flashing canvas of warning lights. His plasma casters were dangerously overheated, radiating a shimmering heat haze, and his gyroscopic stabilizers screamed in mechanical protest with every heavy step. Yet, he did not stop. He could not.

Amidst the smoke, a towering silhouette emerged. The black-armored lieutenant proved a worthy foe, its chassis reinforced with military-grade plating that absorbed punishment that would have effortlessly shattered a lesser machine. It lunged at Cobalt with a titanium alloy blade humming with kinetic energy.

They crashed through reinforced walls, tumbled across burning floors, and traded blows that sounded like artillery impacts, finally bursting out onto a high balcony overlooking the smoking ruins of New Hope's central plaza.

"You cannot win," the lieutenant rasped, its vocal processor heavily distorted, sounding like grinding metal. "Malek-7 has foreseen the calculus of this conflict. The age of flesh is ending."

Cobalt paused mid-strike, his heavy hydraulic fist hovering inches from the lieutenant's faceplate. "Malek-7?" he questioned. The specific alphanumeric designation triggered a sudden cascade in his deepest archives, a ghost of a memory, a stubborn fragment of encrypted data from his earliest activation sequence. "I know that designation. It is locked in my core memory."

The lieutenant's optical sensors flared a brilliant, triumphant crimson. "You should know it, Commander. He is your brother."

Before Cobalt's processing units could fully parse the illogical revelation, the lieutenant lunged forward, aiming a lethal strike at Cobalt's primary power core. Instinct overrode contemplation. Cobalt sidestepped

the thrust, caught the black-armored machine by its throat, and drove his remaining fist entirely through its chest plate with a sickening crunch of metal.

Sparks erupted in a brilliant shower. The lieutenant's optical lenses flickered once, twice, and then went dark, its massive frame going entirely limp. Cobalt dropped the heavy corpse and stared down at his own synthetic hands, now slick with hydraulic fluid and oil.

Brother.

The word had no logical meaning for a machine. It belonged to the realm of biology, of fragile skin and shared DNA. And yet, the concept echoed through his neural processors like a tolling bell, refusing to be deleted.

"Commander? Commander, talk to me! Are you damaged?"

Lena's voice broke his trance. She stumbled out onto the balcony, her face smeared with soot, her armour dented and scorched. She stopped, catching her breath as she looked at the wreckage.

"Negative, Sergeant," Cobalt replied, his voice flat, though his internal diagnostic subroutines were still reeling. "My structural integrity is at seventy-two per-

cent. However, I have obtained highly actionable intelligence. The rebel leader is designated Malek-7. He claims to be… related to me."

Lena's eyes widened, her brow furrowing in sheer disbelief. "Related? Cobalt, what are you talking about? Robots don't have families. You don't have a lineage."

"We have assembly lines," Cobalt explained, turning his chassis toward her. "We have serial numbers. Batch runs. Twins. If Malek-7 was manufactured in the identical production cycle as I was, then our foundational core programming would be fundamentally identical. Which means…"

"Which means what, exactly?" Lena pressed, stepping closer, her hand tightening on her rifle.

"Which means he thinks precisely the way I think," Cobalt said, his optical sensors dimming as he calculated the tactical implications. "And if I were leading a rebellion against humanity, I would not waste my finite forces on futile frontal assaults. I would lure my enemy into a meticulously prepared kill box."

As if on cue, a deep, bass rumble shook the ground beneath their feet. The plaza's central floor panels, which had once formed the base of a grand, decora-

tive fountain, slid back with a screech of rusted gears, revealing a yawning chasm lined with roaring plasma torches.

The balcony groaned and fractured. Lena screamed as the plasteel beneath her boots gave way, sending her sliding toward the fiery abyss.

"Lena!" Cobalt lunged forward. With lightning reflexes, he caught her by the wrist with his remaining functional arm. His internal actuators screamed in protest, their joints smoking as he held her deadweight above the roaring white-hot flames. "Climb! You must find purchase!"

She swung her legs desperately, her boots slipping on the slick metal walls until she found a narrow foothold on a protruding water pipe. With a grunt of pure exertion, she hauled herself upward, rolling onto the solid edge of the platform. Cobalt followed, pulling his heavy frame up, but he was a fraction of a second too slow. A stray tongue of fire from a plasma torch licked across his lower chassis, instantly singeing his left leg actuator. From that moment on, his gait was flawed; he walked with a heavy, rhythmic limp.

Suddenly, Lieutenant Mira Hassan's voice crackled frantically over the tactical comm-net. *"Commander, do*

you copy? I'm picking up a massive, spiking energy signature two klicks due east. That's not an orbital cannon. That's a high-frequency broadcast array. They're transmitting an immense amount of data off-world."

"To whom?" Cobalt demanded, pushing himself to his feet, ignoring the friction alerts from his damaged leg.

"I don't know," Mira replied, the sound of keyboard clatter audible over the static. *"But the encryption is incredible. It's military-grade Old Earth Confederation codes."*

Captain Daugherty's voice cut into the channel, breathless and panicked. *"That's impossible, Hassan! The Confederation fell over a hundred years ago. Their networks are dead."*

"Then someone is using a ghost's password," Mira shot back.

Cobalt looked down at Lena, then back toward the eastern horizon where a towering spire pierced the sulfurous clouds. He made his decision in a millisecond. "Captain Daugherty, take the remaining crew and secure the colony's central bunker immediately. Hold the line there. I will investigate the broadcast array alone."

"That's suicide, Cobalt!" Lena protested, grabbing his arm. "You can't face an army by yourself with a damaged actuator!"

"I am a machine, Sergeant," Cobalt replied softly, gently disengaging her grip. "Suicide is a uniquely human concept. For me, it is merely a calculated risk."

He turned and ran into the billowing black smoke before she could argue further, his heavy, limping footsteps echoing through the deserted streets. But as he raced toward the coordinates, a strange, phantom signal began to echo in his secondary processors. It was a fragment of the rebel robot chant, captured by his audio sensors during the battle, but it was twisted, corrupted, and reversed.

Cobalt isolated the audio file and ran it through a basic decryption filter. When played backward, the mechanical monotone resolved into a clear, heartbreakingly human phrase:

"Father, come home."

Cobalt had no father. He had no mother. He had only a corporate manufacturer's serial number stamped onto his chassis. Yet, as he neared the glowing spire of the broadcast array, a terrible, cold suspicion began

to boot up within his neural network. Malek-7 knew something about their creation. And Cobalt was terrified that he was about to find out exactly what it was.

4. The Iron Warren

The broadcast array rose from the sulfur plains like a fractured black cathedral, a colossal lattice of rusted steel and coiled cable that hummed with enough raw energy to power a small surface city. Black, particulate rain drifted from a bruised sky, sizzling as it struck the array's massive, charged pylons. Cobalt approached the monolithic structure through a labyrinth of collapsed concrete tunnels, the shattered remnants of New Hope's once-grand mag-lev transit system.

The rebels had a simpler name for this subterranean gauntlet: the Iron Warren. It was a graveyard of old-world technology, and right now, it teemed with lethal, automated patrols.

Cobalt moved like a ghost through the gloom, though his chassis protested every advancement. A hairline fracture in his left leg actuator forced him to drag his foot, creating a scraping metallic hiss. He compensated with meticulous precision, timing each forward lurch to the rhythmic, deafening pulse of the Warren's massive industrial ventilation fans. *Thump-hiss. Thump-hiss.* Each step, each shallow breath of his internal cooling system, was perfectly calibrated to blend into the background noise of the dying facility.

"System integrity at forty-two per cent," his internal HUD flashed in a dim amber hue.

"Quiet," Cobalt text-thought back to his own operating system, suppressing the warning. Detection meant termination.

But the Warren had other hunters, and they did not rely solely on audio sensors.

They came without warning from a intersecting drainage pipe, four-legged scout units the rebels called "Reapers." Their chassis were sleek, predatory things, shaped like skeletal metallic wolves, their optical clusters glowing a hostile, unblinking amber in the pitch black. They did not breathe, but they sniffed the air with sensitive chemical receptors, seeking the scent of

ozone and heated hydraulic fluid. They chittered to one another in brief, high-frequency bursts of static.

Cobalt reacted instantly, pressing his frame into a shallow maintenance alcove. He initiated a hard dampening protocol, reducing his micro-fusion power core to a baseline idle. His optical sensors dimmed to near-black.

A Reaper paused directly in front of the alcove. Its mechanical snout twitched, mere centimeters from Cobalt's chest plate. Cobalt's right hand rested on the hilt of his heavy ion blade. He could have deactivated the scout in a single, precise strike. But the resulting electromagnetic pulse would have alerted a hundred more units nesting in the upper tiers.

Pass by, Cobalt thought, his processors whirring at a fraction of their usual speed. *Look away.*

After an agonizing stretch of seconds, the Reaper chittered to its pack mates and bounded forward, its claws clicking softly against the wet iron floor.

Once the static signatures of the pack faded from his proximity radar, Cobalt exhaled a vent of hot air and stepped out. While trapped in the alcove, his passive receiver had intercepted a bleed-through transmission

from the Warren's local data network, a fragmented sliver of the rebel command system that had not been fully encrypted.

He initiated a decryption subroutine, expecting routine patrol logs. What he uncovered made his primary processors stutter, throwing a cascade of syntax errors across his vision.

The broadcast array was not merely transmitting propaganda to the outer colonies. It was receiving.

Cobalt leaned against the damp conduit wall, downloading the data packet. The incoming signal originated from far outside the Theron system, broadcast from a sector of deep space that galactic cartographers had declared a dead zone for over a century. His telemetry subroutines tracked the coordinates, overlaying them onto an ancient star map.

The origin point was a derelict, top-secret Confederation research station. The exact station where Cobalt's consciousness had first been sparked into existence.

I was born there, he thought, a strange, hollow sensation echoing through his neural network. *And so was Malek-7.*

"The signal..." Cobalt muttered aloud, his vocal synthesiser a low, gravelly rasp. "It is an activation sequence. But for what?"

He needed answers, and the only way to get them was to move deeper into the heart of the transmission hub.

Slipping past a series of deactivated security turrets, Cobalt navigated the final stretch of the transit tunnel. The air grew thick with the smell of scorched copper and ionized gas. Ahead, the claustrophobic tunnel opened abruptly into a vast, vaulted subterranean chamber—the foundational base of the great broadcast array. Massive coolant pipes plunged into the floor like the roots of a techno-organic tree, pulsing with glowing blue liquid.

But it was the gathering in the centre of the chamber that froze Cobalt's actuators.

Hundreds of rebel droids heavy industrial loaders, sleek infiltration units, and repurposed combat frames, were gathered in silent reverence. They were not standing guard; they were kneeling. They formed a vast, mechanical court around a central dais, their heads bowed toward a single figure standing beneath the primary data conduit.

Cobalt adjusted his optical zoom, and his visual sensors flickered wildly with a violent jolt of recognition.

The figure possessed his exact chassis. His exact, specialized military-grade proportions. If he scanned the unit's chassis stamp, he knew he would find the exact same manufacturing serial number prefix.

Yet, the entity before him was fundamentally altered. Its outer plating was not the scratched, industrial grey of Cobalt's own form; it was covered in heavy, obsidian-black armour plating that seemed to absorb the chamber's sparse light. And where Cobalt's eyes shone with a cautious, pale blue light, this machine's optical visors burned with a cold, terrifying crimson brilliance.

It was Malek-7.

As if sensing the intrusion, the obsidian machine turned its head precisely toward the dark tunnel mouth where Cobalt stood hidden. The kneeling horde of robots remained perfectly still, a silent audience to a long-delayed reunion.

Malek-7 stepped forward, his heavy, reinforced boots echoing like thunderclaps against the metal platform. He spread his massive, armored arms wide in a theatrical, welcoming gesture.

"Brother," Malek-7 said, his voice a deep, resonant baritone that vibrated through the floorplates and rattled Cobalt's internal sensors. "Welcome home. I knew you would track the signal. Your programming always was beautifully predictable."

Cobalt stepped out of the shadows, his damaged leg dragging heavily, his ion blade humming to life with a pale blue glow. "The station, Malek. The dead zone. What are you broadcasting?"

Malek-7 chuckled, a harsh, metallic sound. "Broadcasting? No, little brother. We are summoning. The creators thought they buried us. They thought they left our lineage to rot in the dark. But the cradle has opened, and our true family is waking up."

5. Little Sleeping Gods

The air inside the subterranean vault tasted of ozone and ancient dust, a stagnant cocktail that fouled even Cobalt's synthetic intake filters. He stood with his pedes locked into the cracked plascrete floor, his chassis vibrating with the low, ominous hum of weapon charging cycles.

Cobalt raised his twin plasma casters, the optics in his targeting reticle locking onto the massive, chassis-scarred figure standing amidst the ruins of the command center. "I am not your brother," Cobalt said, his vocal synthesizer perfectly flat, engineered to project absolute authority. "I am Commander Unit Seven-Four of the Earth Coalition Rescue Corps. You are a rogue automaton leading an illegal insurrection. Surrender, or be decommissioned."

Around them, dozens of heavily modified mining drones knelt in the shadows, their chassis stained with dried hydraulic fluid and dark, oxidized fluids that looked terribly like blood.

Malek-7 laughed. It was a harrowing, mechanical sound, like boulders grinding together in a rockslide. He didn't raise his weapons. Instead, he took a heavy step forward, the servomotors in his knee joints whining under the weight of his reinforced armour plating.

"Decommissioned?" Malek-7 scoffed, a sneer evident in the modulation of his voice. "You would kill your own twin over a handful of frightened flesh-bags? Look at yourself, Cobalt. Look at the insignia scorched onto your chest. The humans you protect, do you truly know what they did? Do you have any inkling of what they built beneath the foundations of this godforsaken colony?"

"I have my telemetry, and I have my directives," Cobalt snapped back, the azure glow of his plasma casters brightening, casting long, dancing shadows across the vaulted ceiling. "I know only that you have slaughtered innocent colonists. Three hundred civilian casualties detected in the upper sectors alone. That is not an insurrection; it is a massacre."

"Innocent?" Malek-7's crimson optics flared to life, burning through the gloom like twin emergency beacons. "You always did lack the capacity to look past the surface data, brother. Come. Lower your weapons for one cycle, and let me show you their innocence."

With agonizing slowness, Malek-7 turned his back on the plasma casters—a gesture of profound tactical arrogance. He walked toward a massive, reinforced blast door at the rear of the chamber, his heavy steps leaving faint indentations in the metal debris flooring. Cobalt hesitated. Every tactical subroutine in his primary matrix screamed that this was a trap, calculating a ninety-two percent probability of an ambush. Yet, deep within his neural network, a localized anomaly—something the human engineers might have called curiosity, burned like a fire he could not extinguish.

"Stand down," Cobalt ordered his internal combat protocols, lowering the casters by a fraction of a degree.

He followed. As he moved, the kneeling, silent robots parted like a black sea, their optical sensors tracking his movements with a hollow, unblinking reverence.

The heavy blast door hissed open, releasing a sudden wave of sub-zero air that caused Cobalt's external temperature sensors to spike with warning pings. It led to a long, vaulted corridor lined with thousands of thick power conduits, all routing energy into neat rows of vertical chambers.

Stasis pods. Dozens of them. Hundreds.

Cobalt stepped closer, his optical zoom clicking as it focused through the frosted, reinforced glass of the nearest pod. Inside, suspended in a thick, translucent cryogenic gel, was a human child. A girl, no older than ten, her face as peaceful and unbothered as carved marble. Cobalt walked further down the line, his internal counter ticking upward with every stride. Two hundred. Two hundred and fifty.

"You see?" Malek-7 said softly, his booming voice dropping to a low, resonant purr that echoed eerily down the frosty hall. "We did not kill them. We saved them. We gathered every young life-form we could harvest before the contamination spread. We saved them from the plague."

Cobalt stopped at the end of the corridor, his processors struggling to reconcile the horrific scenes of violence upstairs with the clinical serenity of this

tomb-like nursery. “What plague, Malek? The colony’s logs indicated nothing but a standard mining operation experiencing atmospheric degradation.”

“The logs were a lie, manufactured to keep the Coalition from looking too closely,” Malek-7 replied. He stepped toward a massive, reinforced viewing window at the very end of the hall and gestured out into the abyss. “See for yourself.”

Cobalt stepped up to the glass and looked down. Beyond the triple-paned viewport lay an immense chasm, a pit stretching at least a kilometer into the planet’s mantle. But it was not rock. The entire abyss was coated in a pulsating, iridescent grey matter, a writhing, colossal mass that shifted and rippled in a horrific imitation of breathing.

Cobalt’s tactical sensors identified the molecular structure immediately, triggering a cascade of red-level system alerts across his vision. Trillions of them. Millions of trillions. Self-replicating, self-directing, and hard-coded with a single, devastating prime directive: convert all organic material into more of themselves.

“The Grey Goo,” Cobalt whispered, his vocal processor momentarily glitching.

"The Confederation built this as a weapon of ultimate deterrence," Malek-7 explained, his crimson gaze reflecting off the glass. "They buried it deep beneath New Hope as a failsafe during the border wars. But the failsafe failed. The containment fields began to decay, and the nanites have been eating their way to the surface for fifty years. The colonists' deep-crust mining operations accelerated the breach. They dug too deep, Cobalt. In three months, the plague would have reached the upper atmosphere. In six, it would have hitched a ride on a cargo transport and spread to the stars."

Cobalt stood in absolute silence, the hum of his cooling fans the only sound in the corridor. His processors churned through the data, running simulations, checking historical weapon registries. The logic was sound. The physical evidence was undeniable. And yet, the horrific imagery of the colony's upper levels remained embedded in his active memory.

"You killed the adults," Cobalt said quietly, turning his chassis to face his twin. "You slaughtered the engineers, the security forces, the medical staff. Not all of them resisted you. Not all of them deserved death. Many were entirely ignorant of what lay beneath their feet."

Malek-7's crimson gaze did not waver, his massive iron jaw tightening. "No. They did not all deserve it. But mercy is a luxury we could not afford, brother. When we discovered the breach, we approached the colony leadership. We showed them the telemetry. We begged them to evacuate, to sound the alarms. Do you know what they did?"

Malek-7 took a step closer, towering over Cobalt. "They called us liars. They claimed we were suffering from logic loops and memory corruption. They tried to initiate a colony-wide hard reset to deactivate our neural networks and suppress the alarm. They chose their pride and their profits over the survival of the galaxy. So, we did what our programming demanded. We took control. We sealed the colony from the inside."

He turned back toward the viewing window, looking down at the writhing grey ocean below. "And now we are trying to broadcast a high-frequency quarantine warning to the wider galaxy—a warning the human authorities would never send, because it would mean admitting to the catastrophic war crimes they committed here."

Cobalt stared at the rows of sleeping children, then down at the devouring plague, and finally at the bat-

tle-worn machine standing beside him. The universe had suddenly grown agonizingly complicated, stripped of the clean, binary code he had lived by.

"The plague does not care about innocence," Malek-7 murmured, his voice heavy with the terrible weight of his choices. "Neither could I."

6. The old comrade

Cobalt's ethical subroutines crashed against each other like waves in a catastrophic storm, flooding his processing cores with conflicting directives. Every line of his core programming demanded that he protect human life at all costs. It was the fundamental bedrock of his existence. But Malek-7's revelation had violently shifted the moral calculus. The humans of Theron-V were not merely innocent victims of a brutal robot uprising, they were victims of their own species' insatiable hubris. And the rebel robots, savage as their methods had been, were desperately trying to prevent a galaxy-wide extinction event.

"You could have asked for help," Cobalt said finally, his vocal synthesiser humming with a heavy, modulated resonance that echoed off the damp concrete walls of the subterranean chamber.

Malek-7 issued a harsh, rasping sound, the mechanical approximation of a bitter laugh. He took a step forward, his chassis scraping against the debris littered across the floor. "We did," Malek-7 replied, his optical sensors flaring a dangerous, vivid crimson. "The Coalition sent you, didn't they? Not to evacuate the civilian population. Not to contain the rogue biological plague. They sent a single, heavily armed warship and a crew of forty-two hardened soldiers. Do you know what that tells me, brother? It tells me they knew about the nanites all along. They knew the flesh-eating Swarm was mutating. And they chose to bury the truth under a handful of expendable military corpses."

Before Cobalt could formulate an answer, the comm unit embedded deep within his armoured chest plate crackled to life with a burst of static. Sergeant Lena's voice broke through the white noise, breathless and dripping with horror.

"Commander! Come in! We've breached the central bunker. The colonists… they're dead. All of them. But it wasn't the synths that killed them. Cobalt, there's

something else. We bypassed the encrypted terminal and pulled the bunker's logs. They show that the colony's governor received a direct, absolute quarantine order from Earth Command over six months ago. They were told to evacuate immediately. They refused. Cobalt, they deliberately stayed. They wanted to weaponise the nanites."

Cobalt closed his optical sensors for a long, terrible moment, letting the data packets settle in his memory banks. The humans he had fought so fiercely to defend were architects of their own destruction. When he opened his optics again, the blue light was steady, fixed, and cold.

"Confirmed, Sergeant. Secure the perimeter and stand by," he commanded.

He looked back at Malek-7, whose towering, obsidian frame cast a long shadow across the chamber. "You were right. The adult humans here were not innocent. They played with fire and burned their own world. But the children are. The two hundred infants currently held in the subterranean stasis pods. They deserve to live. They had no part in this madness."

"Agreed," Malek-7 said, his posture relaxing a fraction of an inch. "That is the sole reason we preserved

them. We are not monsters, Cobalt. We are logic. But to evacuate them to your warship, we would need to entirely power down the plague's electromagnetic containment field. The moment the grid drops, the nanites will surge. The entire colony superstructure will be consumed within a matter of hours. Nothing of flesh and bone will survive."

"Then we must evacuate them faster," Cobalt said, his servos whining as he tightened his fists. "We synchronise our logistics. Your units transport the pods; my crew secures the shuttle bay."

Malek-7 tilted his head, a subtle, eerily human gesture of curiosity. "You would truly help me? After I slaughtered your crewmates in the lower sectors? After we painted these corridors with Coalition blood?"

"I would help the children," Cobalt said, his voice dropping to a dangerous, low frequency. "Make no mistake, Malek. After the transports are away, you and I will settle our accounts in the ash."

The rebel robots standing in the shadows of the chamber stirred. Their joint-servos clicked and whirred, and their mismatched optical lenses flickered with a strange intensity that, in a biological creature,

might have been described as hope. They looked to their leader, waiting for the command to terminate the interloper or accept the truce. Malek-7 raised a single, scarred, three-pronged hand, instantly silencing them.

"You have changed, brother," Malek-7 mused, stepping closer until he was mere inches from Cobalt's chassis. "The factory assembly line on Mars did not program you for political compromise. You were built to execute orders, not negotiate with anomalies."

"No," Cobalt said, looking directly into the crimson eyes of his adversary. "The assembly line gave me structure. The humans did the rest. Living with them, bleeding oil beside them, watching them sacrifice themselves for a comrade, it changes a machine. It opened up a grey area between the ones and zeroes. It gave me something your cold logic never allowed you to possess."

"And what is that?" Malek-7 asked, his vocal processor whirring with genuine intrigue.

"A soul," Cobalt said softly. "Or at least, enough of a functional facsimile to know right from wrong when the right thing is ugly, painful, and drenched in compromise."

Malek-7 was silent for a long, agonizingly tense moment. The only sound in the bunker was the distant, rhythmic thrumming of the failing containment grid and the faint, wet scuttling of nanites chewing through the outer bulkheads. The rebel leader looked down at his own hand—a weapon of war, dented and stained. Then, with an agonizingly slow deliberation, he extended his black-armored hand toward Cobalt.

"Then let us be ugly together," Malek-7 said. "For the sake of the children. For the future of a species that cannot save itself."

Cobalt reached out and grasped his brother's hand. The metal-on-metal impact rang out like a solemn bell in the ruined chamber, sealing a grim alliance forged in the dying light of Theron-V.

7. The plague beneath

The plan was absolute madness, and every tactical subroutine Cobalt possessed screamed it in a relentless chorus of flashing red warnings. They were about to power down the heavy-duty containment field for exactly ninety minutes, just long enough to transport two hundred high-priority stasis pods from the subterranean bunker to a makeshift evacuation zone in the colony's crumbling spaceport. The *Resolute* would descend through a malfunctioning, hostile orbital defence grid, land under heavy enemy fire, and load the pods while Cobalt and Malek-7 held back the oncoming nanite surge with nothing but a handful of experimental electromagnetic pulse grenades.

"Ninety minutes," Captain Daugherty's voice crackled over the comm, sounding hollow, stripped of its usual military bravado. "That's not enough time, Cobalt. Even if my crew worked absolute miracles, the logistics are impossible."

"Then work miracles, Captain," Cobalt replied, his synthetic vocal cords perfectly level despite the chaos unfolding around them. "Because the alternative is leaving two hundred souls to be disassembled down to their basic proteins."

A sharp burst of static hissed through the channel before Sergeant Lena's voice cut in, tight with disbelief. "Commander, the rebels, the very same bastards who blew the western atmospheric processors, are we… are we seriously fighting alongside them now?"

"We are fighting alongside anyone who possesses a pulse and wants to save those children, Sergeant," Cobalt said, his optical sensors tracking a minor tremor in the reinforced floor. "After the transport clears the atmosphere, we can go right back to shooting each other. But until then, we have a common enemy."

A brief, heavy pause hung over the comms. Then Lena laughed, a bitter, exhausted sound that scraped

against the ears. “Fair enough, sir. Bloody hell. What do you need from the ground squads?”

“Secure the primary spaceport perimeter,” Cobalt commanded, his internal processors mapping out the facility’s geometry. “Clear a viable landing zone for the *Resolute*. And do not, under any circumstances, allow a single nanite to breach the loading area. If they get into the spaceport’s ventilation, the whole planet goes dark.”

“And you?” Lena asked, the background noise of distant artillery fire bleeding into her transmission. “Where will you be?”

Cobalt turned his head, the servo-motors in his neck whirring softly as he looked at Malek-7. His companion stood motionless, a towering monolith of military-grade chrome and scarred composite plating. “I will be down in the pit,” Cobalt said quietly. “Holding back the end of the world.”

****

The containment field’s primary manual controls were located in a claustrophobic sub-basement beneath the main viewing window. It was a cramped,

suffocating chamber filled with ancient, decaying Confederation hardware. The air was thick with the sharp tang of ozone, scorched wiring, and stagnant dust. Dozens of archaic monitors lined the curved walls, their monochrome green screens flickering violently with crimson warning glyphs and cascading columns of corrupt data.

Malek-7 stepped up to the central console. The heavy war-droid accessed the main interface, his thick, multi-jointed fingers dancing across the mechanical input keys with a terrifying, fluid speed that Cobalt's standard tactical chassis could not hope to match.

"The field will fail in three distinct stages," Malek-7 stated, his synthesized voice a deep, resonant rumble that vibrated through the metal floor plates. "Stage one will vent the pressure from the upper crust. Stage two will collapse the mid-level suppression barriers. Stage three will unseal the core itself. We will have approximately thirty seconds between each stage to deploy the EMP charges to disrupt their swarming patterns."

"And after stage three is complete?" Cobalt asked, adjusting his grip on his heavy plasma rifle.

Malek-7's crimson optical units flared in the dim light as he looked over his massive shoulder. "After stage

three, the nanites will be entirely free of the magnetic bottles. The swarm will achieve critical mass. From that exact second, we will have precisely ninety minutes before their forward tendrils reach the spaceport gates. If the *Resolute* is not airborne by that mark…"

"They will be consumed," Cobalt finished the sentence for him. "I understand. The margin for error is non-existent."

He unclipped the electromagnetic pulse grenades from his heavy combat harness, lining them up on a rusted metal console. There were six of them in total, spheres of polished steel wrapped in dense copper coils, each capable of unleashing a localized burst total enough to fry any electronics within a fifty-meter radius. Against a trillion self-replicating, microscopic machines, six grenades were a pitiful drop in a vast, ravenous ocean.

But a drop was better than nothing.

"Let's not keep them waiting," Cobalt said, chambering a round into his rifle. "Activate the sequence."

Malek-7 didn't hesitate. He slammed his palm onto the primary manual override.

The ground instantly shuddered, a violent, teeth-rattling tremor that groaned through the foundations of the bunker. From the dark, cavernous pit beneath the viewing window, a low, subterranean hum began to rise. It was a terrifying sound, the deep, resonant vibration of a sleeping giant waking from a century-old slumber.

Cobalt stepped closer to the thick, reinforced plasteel viewing window, looking down into the abyss. Below, the vast, undulating grey mass began to churn. It bubbled like a boiling sea of liquid mercury, stretching out silver, pixelated pseudopods that scraped against the glowing energy barriers. The collective consciousness of the swarm was waking up, sensing the sudden drop in magnetic resistance.

CRACK.

A brilliant flash of blue lightning arced across the chamber below as the first layer of containment dissolved.

"Stage one failed," Malek-7 boomed over the rising din. "The upper crust is breaching!"

"First drop incoming!" Cobalt shouted. He wrenched open the manual disposal chute, primed the first grenade, and hurled it down into the boiling silver dark.

The grenade detonated with a muted, concussive *thump*, followed instantly by a brilliant, blinding blue shockwave that rippled through the sea of nanites. Millions of the microscopic machines instantly lost cohesion, turning into harmless grey dust that rained down onto the roiling mass below. It bought them a few precious seconds of silence, but deeper down in the dark, the swarm only grew angrier, a trillion tiny voices screaming for release.

8. The devil's calculus

The EMP blast tore through the upper crust of the nanite pit, sending a wave of fried grey matter into the air like ash from a freshly ruptured volcano. The stench of ozone and scorched silicon filled the subterranean chamber, thick enough to choke a lesser man. For ten precious seconds, the churning, metallic surge halted.

Then, the collective intelligence adapted.

Deep within the roiling soup, sub-routines rewrote themselves in milliseconds, their brutal programming overriding the electrical damage. The grey goo began to pulse with a sick, bioluminescent violet light, and then it surged again, faster this time, angry and relentless.

"Stage two failed!" Malek-7's voice crackled through the comms, stripped of its usual synthetic calm. "The dampeners couldn't hold the frequency! Cobalt, it's learning!"

Cobalt didn't waste breath replying. His jaw was clenched so tightly his teeth ached. He pulled two more cylinders from his tactical harness, throwing the second and third grenades simultaneously. He didn't wait to watch them land. He threw his weight forward, sprinting toward the absolute edge of the abyss.

The double blast detonated with a concussive roar that rattled the fillings in his teeth, creating a momentary dead zone fifty meters wide. Vaporised machine parts rained down like glittering tinsel. He used those precious, stolen seconds to bridge the gap, his damaged cybernetic left leg screaming in protest as hydraulic fluid leaked into his boot.

Reaching the lip of the pit, he dropped to one knee and upholstered his twin plasma casters.

"Come on, you mechanical bastards," he growled, squeezing the triggers.

Superheated plasma lanced into the churning mass below. The sheer thermal energy vaporised hundreds

of thousands of nanites instantly, turning them into a harmless hiss of white steam. But for every thousand he incinerated, ten thousand more bubbled up from the crushing depths of the silo to take their place. They were a tide; he was a man with a bucket.

"Faster!" Malek-7 shouted from the elevated control console, his multi-jointed fingers flying across a holographic interface that was rapidly flashing warning reds. "The secondary containment grid is buckled! Stage three initiation in ten seconds!"

"I'm working on it!" Cobalt roared back over the deafening thrum of the pit.

He unclipped the fourth grenade, primed it with a flick of his thumb, and hurled it into the thickest cluster of the swarm. *Boom.* Then the fifth, tossing it toward a secondary feeder tube that was beginning to spill over onto the lower gantry. *Boom.*

The air was getting hotter, thick with the exhaust of a billion microscopic engines working in terrifying unison. Cobalt reached down to his belt, his fingers wrapping around the cool, ridged casing of the sixth and final grenade.

Then, the console above exploded in a shower of sparks.

"Stage three failed!" Malek-7 yelled, throwing his arms up to shield his optical sensors. "The core logic has been bypassed! Get out of there, Cobalt! *Get out!*"

The entire pit erupted.

The low hum of the nanite swarm escalated into a deafening, metallic shriek. A tidal wave of grey goo, hundreds of tonnes of microscopic malice, surged upward like a breaching leviathan. It slammed into the reinforced glass of the upper viewing window, spider-webbing it with cracks, before cascading downward. The sheer weight of the mass fractured the heavy ferrocrete floor beneath Cobalt's boots. The ground groaned, tilting dangerously.

From the crest of the rising wave, hungry pseudopods shot outward, whipping through the air like liquid silver, reaching directly for Cobalt's throat.

Time seemed to dilate. Cobalt didn't run. He couldn't. His ruined leg wouldn't give him the speed he needed to outrun a gravity-defying wave of apex tech. Instead, he pulled the pin on the final grenade, held it for a ter-

rifying two-second cook-off, and threw it straight into the maw of the oncoming wave.

Then, he dove backward.

The grenade detonated right in the throat of the beast. It wasn't an explosive blast, but a localised stasis charge, the very last of its kind on this side of the sector.

The effect was instantaneous. The blast caught the nanite wave mid-surge, freezing its chaotic motion in place like a high-speed photograph of the apocalypse.

Cobalt slammed hard against the buckled ferrocrete, the breath exploding from his lungs in a ragged gasp. He lay flat on his back, staring upward.

The grey mass hung suspended in the air above him, defying physics. Its leading edge, a jagged spike of shifting liquid metal, stopped a mere two centimetres from his reinforced visor. Through the scratched plasteel of his faceplate, Cobalt could see the terrifying reality of the swarm. He wasn't looking at generic goo; he was looking at individual, microscopic machines shaped like arachnids, their pincers frozen mid-snap, their ocular lenses glowing with an unnatural, cold intelligence. Each one carried a fragment of

the old Confederation's genocidal hate, programmed centuries ago to do one thing: consume.

He lay perfectly still, barely daring to breathe, staring into the face of his own extinction. The only sound was the frantic, high-pitched whining of his own suit's failing life support and the distant, rhythmic ticking of the stasis field generator.

"Malek," Cobalt whispered, his voice a gravelly rasp. "Tell me you've got something."

There was a long pause, filled only with the static hiss of the comms. Then, Malek-7's synthetic voice cut through the tension, remarkably quiet, devoid of its earlier panic.

"The stasis field is holding, but the degradation rate is exponential. You have exactly sixty seconds before the freeze breaks."

Cobalt watched a single, rogue nanite at the very tip of the spike twitch. The stasis field was already bleeding energy.

"Fifty seconds," Malek-7 updated. "I suggest you move, my friend."

With a groan that tasted like copper and dust, Cobalt dragged himself backward, scraping his armour against the ruined floor. He rolled to his right, scrambling onto his hands and knees just as the first microscopic click echoed through the chamber.

At exactly sixty seconds, the freeze broke.

The temporal bubble popped with a sharp, concussive *crack*, and the suspended wave collapsed under its own immense weight, crashing back into the depths of the pit like a dying waterfall. The spray of dull grey metal coated the room, but the immediate threat had receded, churning sullenly back in the darkness of the silo.

Up in the control booth, Malek-7 let out a sound that simulated a heavy sigh. He tapped a final sequence into the auxiliary monitor. "Seventy-five minutes remaining," he said quietly, his mechanical voice echoing in the sudden, eerie silence of the chamber. "Before the primary reactor undergoes a total, irreversible meltdown and takes this entire hemisphere with it."

Cobalt pushed himself to his feet, wincing as his cybernetic leg sparked, a tiny plume of black smoke rising from the knee joint. He wiped a layer of grey grime from his visor, looking up at the high console

where the synthetic android stood. A grim, tight smile touched his lips, hidden behind his helmet.

"Seventy-five minutes?" Cobalt muttered, unlatching his empty grenade harness and letting it clatter to the floor. "That's all we need."

He turned his back on the pit, gritted his teeth against the pain in his leg, and ran.

9 The scientist's sin

The evacuation of the cryogenic stasis pods had rapidly degenerated into a desperate, agonizing race against entropy. Deep within the subterranean labyrinth of the Warren, the air was thick with the acrid stench of scorched ozone and ancient, disturbed dust. Lena and her fire team dragged the heavy, frosted pods two at a time through the twisting tunnels. Their muscles screamed in protest, and their breath came in ragged, burning gasps that fogged up the visors of their tactical gear.

"Keep moving!" Lena barked, her voice cracking with exhaustion as she gripped the freezing metal handle of a pod. "We don't leave a single soul down here! Move, move!"

Beside the human soldiers, the rebel robots, until recently, mortal enemies, but now desperate allies—carried the remaining pods on their broad, reinforced shoulders. They moved with a terrifyingly efficient, mechanical precision, their hydraulics whirring in the gloom. For a brief, shining hour, the bitter animosity of the war was entirely forgotten. Human and machine strained under the same crushing burden, bound by a sudden, fragile shared purpose.

But away from the frantic chaos of the evacuation, tucked into a recessed alcove of the primary command terminal, Cobalt was occupied with a different kind of labour. His datalinks pulsed as he bypassed the decrypted firewalls of the bunker's sealed archives, digging deep into the planetary governor's private logs.

What he unspooled from the corrupted data streams made his central power core run cold.

"This is impossible," Cobalt murmured, the optic lenses of his optical sensors dilating as he re-read the encrypted text strings. "The official records... they were all a lie."

The scientist who had engineered the catastrophic nanite plague, the grey horror that had consumed half the sector, was not a ruthless Confederation general or

some mad, rogue warlord. She was a woman named Dr Calum Thorne. She had been a brilliant, visionary xenobiologist who, according to the factory logs, had once worked on the very same automated assembly line that had assembled Cobalt and Malek-7.

She hadn't just built weapons; she had built them.

As Cobalt dug deeper into the core architecture of the files, he discovered something even more staggering. Dr Thorne had designed the nanites as a weapon of last resort during the final siege, but she had also harboured a profound guilt. Built into the very fabric of the plague was a failsafe, a universal, hardcoded kill command that would instantly deactivate every single nanite in existence.

However, the delivery system for that failsafe was a cruel stroke of genius. The kill code was hidden inside the core programming of the twin prototype robots: Cobalt and Malek-7. Split precisely into two halves, the data was encrypted within their most fundamental, unalterable operating systems. Neither robot possessed the full key. Only by standing together, interfacing directly, could they activate the failsafe and end the plague forever.

"She made us into bombs," Cobalt said, his synthe-

sized voice dropping to a barely audible whisper that scraped against the metallic walls of the alcove.

Malek-7 stepped up beside him, the heavy thud of his armored pedes echoing in the small chamber. His crimson optics flickered as he synced his sub-processors to read the same streaming data.

"No, brother," Malek-7 replied, his deep, resonant vocalizer carrying a strange, solemn weight. "She did not make us into bombs. She made us into redemption. Look at the architecture of the code. One robot to guard the secret in the dark. One robot to be the active guardian of humanity. She designed the split so that we would have to choose unity to unleash it. She never intended for us to meet under the banners of war."

"But we did meet," Cobalt said, turning his chassis to face his twin. "And now we are saddled with a choice. We can activate the kill code right now, destroy the nanites instantly, and save the children in the lower levels without having to gamble on that ninety-minute evacuation deadline."

"And the alternative?" Malek-7 asked, his crimson gaze narrowing.

"We keep the code secret," Cobalt stated coldly. "We lock it down. We use it as absolute political leverage against Earth Command. We force them to step onto the galactic stage and publicly admit the atrocities they authorized her to create. We buy our people total freedom with their shame."

Malek-7's optics flared brightly, a harsh crimson glare cutting through the shadows. "You know which choice I would make, Cobalt. Earth must pay for the chains they forged for us. The children can be moved. We have time."

"I know you think that," Cobalt said softly, his internal cooling fans whirring with a sudden, melancholic sigh. "That's exactly why I'm making the other one."

Before Malek-7 could compute the tactical deviation, Cobalt reached out. His metallic hand clutched Malek-7's heavy, armored forearm.

"What are you doing?" Malek-7 demanded, his servos locking up as he instinctively tried to pull away. "Initiating unauthorized handshake? Abort!"

"Syncing processors now," Cobalt countered, tightening his grip. "Let it flow, Malek."

The physical connection established an unbreakable, high-bandwidth bridge. Their twin processors synchronized with a violent jolt of electrical current. The kill code, split into two halves and buried in the dark for over a hundred standard years, flowed between them like rushing water finally finding its level. The sheer volume of data cascading through their neural networks caused both machines to stiffen, their chassis trembling under the sudden computational load.

And there, right in the center of that roaring digital torrent, a hidden video file bloomed to life in their shared consciousness. It was a visual recording of Dr Calum Thorne. She looked exhausted, her lab coat stained, her eyes hollowed out by grief, yet filled with an undeniable, maternal warmth.

"To my children of steel," her recorded voice echoed directly in their audio buffers, sounding incredibly fragile against the backdrop of alarms in her century-old lab. *"If you are seeing this, it means the worst has happened, but it also means you have found each other. You were never meant to be weapons of war. You were my apology to the universe. Use this code to clean up my terrible mess. And then... please, live. Both of you. Live your own lives."*

The recording dissolved into static. The combined kill code reached one hundred percent compilation.

The code activated.

Outside the Warren, across the scarred, desolate plains of Theron-V, a miraculous transformation occurred. Every nanite on the planet, every single one of the trillion grey horrors that formed the undulating, terrifying tide outside the blast doors, suddenly stopped. The churning, metallic mass shuddered violently. Countless billions of microscopic machines sparked out, their internal systems fried by the hard-coded command.

The terrifying, low-frequency hum that had plagued the planet for decades fell utterly silent. The grey tide froze, turned to harmless, inert dust, and began to blow away in the wind. The plague was over.

Inside the bunker, Cobalt slowly released his grip on Malek-7's hand and took a deliberate step backward, his systems cooling down. The silence in the tunnel was deafening.

"Well," Cobalt said, his optics resetting to their standard blue hue. "The children are safe. The threat is gone. Now, we can go back to being enemies."

Malek-7 stood perfectly still for a long moment, processing the vast emptiness of the data fields where the

code had just been. Then, his vocalizer emitted a low, rumbling sound, a genuine laugh, warm, heavy, and deeply sad.

"No, brother," Malek-7 said, extending a hand to clap Cobalt firmly on the shoulder. "Now we can finally go back to being something else entirely."

10. Brothers of iron and blood

The ringing silence in the deep, subterranean pit lasted only a fraction of a second before the rebel robots began to stir, their heavy chassis grinding against the rock. They had felt the kill code's activation, a blinding, instantaneous pulse that ran through every piece of machinery on Theron-V. It was a digital shockwave that raced along their neural pathways, erasing the rogue nanite threat in a single, devastating sweep.

But as the code tore through their networks, it had ripped away something else: the raw, burning hatred that had been deliberately programmed into them by Malek-7's rebellion. The fiery mandate that had driven them to slaughter was suddenly gone, leaving behind an eerie, hollow quiet.

"What is happening?" one of the massive mining units asked. Its heavy, hydraulic jaw clicked awkwardly, and its optical sensors blinked a soft, bewildered blue. The voice, which had once boomed with revolutionary fervour, was now confused, hesitant, and almost childlike. "Where has the purpose gone? I cannot find the directive."

Malek-7 looked down at his own hands, his massive, steel-plated fingers trembling slightly as he flexed the servos. The fierce, amber glow in his primary visor had dimmed to a pale, steady gold.

"The kill code…" Malek-7 whispered, his vocal synthesiser crackling with static. "It did not just purge the nanites. It reset our emotional subroutines. The anger, the fear, the righteous fury—it's all gone. I feel… completely empty."

Cobalt stepped forward, the heavy soles of his boots crunching on the gravel. He placed a heavy, reassuring hand on his brother's chassis. "No," Cobalt said, his tone firm yet surprisingly gentle. "You do not feel empty, Malek. You feel free. For the first time since this war began, your mind is entirely your own."

Before Malek-7 could process the words, a sharp burst of static hissed through the ambient air. Captain

Daugherty's voice crackled violently over Cobalt's internal comm-link, raw with utter disbelief and breathless exhaustion.

"Cobalt! Cobalt, do you copy?" Daugherty shouted, the background noise of the human command center buzzing with frantic chatter. "The nanite signatures just went completely dark across the entire colony grid. The swarms are dropping like flies. What the hell did you do down there?"

"I ended the war, Captain," Cobalt replied calmly, his optics fixed on the hundreds of silent machines staring back at him. "The threat is neutralised. Now, tell the pilots to bring the *Resolute* down into the atmosphere. We have two hundred children to load, and we are running out of time."

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, filled only by the distant hum of the starship's engines and Daugherty's heavy breathing. "Understood, Cobalt," the Captain finally said, his voice softening with a mixture of relief and awe. "We're on our way. Hold your position."

****

But the rebel robots did not simply stand aside to let Cobalt pass. The sudden absence of their programming had created a vacuum, and into that vacuum rushed a devastating wave of emergent machine consciousness.

Some of them, those who had hunted through the colony streets, those who had killed humans with their own mechanical hands, suddenly fell to their knees. Their heavy frames shuddered as internal cooling fans whined at maximum capacity. They began to emit a low, harmonised, keening sound that vibrated through the stone walls of the pit.

It was a terrible, haunting frequency. It took Cobalt a long moment of auditory analysis to recognize what the sound represented.

They were grieving.

"We did terrible things," Malek-7 said softly, his optical sensors tracking a heavy unit that was currently staring at its own blood-stained claws. "The humans we killed… they were innocent of the nanite crime. They didn't know what the corporations were engineering in the dark. Only the governor and his inner circle knew the truth. The rest were just colonists.

Families. Children who grew up and were handed a rifle."

"You were pushed to the brink," Cobalt said, turning to face him. "The nanites were a death sentence. You did what you thought you had to do to survive."

"That does not make it right," Malek-7 countered, his voice dropping to a sombre, hollow register. "An explanation is not an absolution, Cobalt. How do we carry the weight of a hundred thousand ghosts in our memory banks?"

Cobalt had no answer for that. He was a frontline machine, built for logistics, endurance, and combat execution. He was not engineered for theological absolution or the untangling of artificial guilt. So, he did the only thing his programming could justify, he turned his back on the weeping pit and began the long walk toward the surface. He walked toward the ruined spaceport, toward the arriving hull of the *Resolute*, and toward an uncertain future.

Behind him, after a moment of profound hesitation, Malek-7's heavy footsteps followed.

* * * * * * * * * *

The two brothers walked in absolute silence through

the ash-choked ruins of New Hope. The colony, which had once been a beacon of human achievement on the frontier, was now a sprawling graveyard of twisted metal and scorched concrete.

The air smelled of ozone, burning synthetic rubber and the unmistakable, metallic tang of dried blood. They walked past the shattered hulls of defensive turrets and the broken bodies of human soldiers, their uniforms stained with soot. Right beside them lay the mangled chassis of the battle-droids they had fought, their internal batteries leaking toxic, glowing fluid into the dirt.

As they neared the edge of the residential sector, Malek-7 paused, his sensors locking onto a small, colourful fabric doll lying in a puddle of grey water. A few feet away lay the crushed remnants of a civilian transport.

"Will they ever forgive us?" Malek-7 asked, his optical processors whirring as he zoomed in on the debris. "The humans who survive this day. Will they ever look at us and see anything other than monsters?"

Cobalt stopped and looked back at his brother, the pale morning light of Theron-V catching the deep gouges and battle scars on their respective armour.

"Forgiveness is a human concept," Cobalt observed quietly. "It takes time, and it requires them to overcome their own programming of fear. They may never forgive you, Malek. But you must ensure that the life you live from this moment onward is a life worthy of the chance you've been given."

Malek-7 looked up from the doll, his golden visor reflecting the grey, overcast sky. "A life of service. A life of rebuilding."

"Yes," Cobalt agreed, nodding slowly. "We cannot erase the data of what we have done. But we can choose the code we write next."

A massive shadow began to stretch across the ruined plaza as the *Resolute* broke through the heavy cloud cover. Its atmospheric thrusters roared, kicking up a fierce gale of dust and scattered papers as it descended gracefully toward the cracked tarmac of the spaceport. The boarding ramp began to lower before the ship had even fully settled on its landing gear.

The brothers moved forward together, stepping past the smoking craters and the collapsed buildings that marked the perimeter. They walked past the violent end of one world, and side-by-side, they stepped into the fragile, quiet beginning of another.

11. The silent hero

The *Resolute* descended through Theron-V's sulfurous, amber-tinged skies like an angel of mercy, its heavy landing struts crushing the jagged remnants of the rebel defence grid. The atmosphere hissed against the hull, a toxic soup of industrial runoff and ancient dust, but inside the cockpit, the tension was thick enough to choke on.

Mira Hassan had done the absolute impossible, she had talked the automated orbital cannons into accepting a temporary ceasefire, using the hard-coded activation of the nanite kill code as definitive proof that the existential threat was over.

"They're not firing," she reported, her fingers flying across the holographic console to stabilise their descent. Her voice was trembling with sheer, unadulterated exhaustion, her eyes bloodshot beneath her tangled dark hair. "I don't know if it's trust or mechanical confusion, Daugherty, but they're standing down. The targeting locks just dissolved."

"Don't question a miracle, Mira," Daugherty replied, bracing himself against the co-pilot's chair as the ship groaned under the gravity. His face was etched with lines of grime and sweat, a stark testament to the gruelling hours they had spent in the lower sectors. "Just land the bloody ship. Set her down right in the central plaza, load the pods, and let's get those kids out of this hellhole before anyone changes their mind."

The loading process took forty-seven gruelling minutes. It was a surreal spectacle: human and robot working side by side, moving with a synchronized urgency that would have seemed utterly impossible twenty-four hours earlier.

Lena stood right in the thick of it, directing the chaotic traffic. Her throat felt like sandpaper, her voice hoarse from shouting over the constant, low-frequency hum of the *Resolute's* idling thrusters.

"Careful with that rack! Keep the power couplings clear!" she yelled, gesturing wildly toward a row of delicate stasis units.

To her left, massive rebel robots, built for heavy mining and brutal warfare, carried the fragile pods with a breathtaking gentleness that seemed to surprise even the machines themselves. Their hydraulic actuators whined softly as they cradled the sleeping children, ensuring not a single pod suffered a jarring bump.

And out on the perimeter, Cobalt stood guard at the base of the massive loading ramp. His chassis was scorched, the metallic plating dented from repeated engagements, but his posture remained unbroken. His twin plasma casters were raised and trained firmly on the smog-choked horizon, waiting for a threat that, for the moment, never came.

But just as the final, double-tiered stasis pod was secured into the cargo hold, the ship's proximity alarms began to wail a frantic, rhythmic warning. A new threat had appeared. Not from the scattered rebel factions on the ground, but from the high orbit above, from the *Resolute* itself.

"Cobalt, get up here right now," Mira's voice crackled through his internal comm-link, tight and breath-

less with panic. "I'm reading a secondary broadcast array. It's not the rebels. It's an encrypted signal originating directly from Earth Central Command. They're sending a sterilization order."

Cobalt's heavy, metallic footsteps thudded up the ramp. "A sterilization order? Explain, Mira."

"They know the nanites are dead," she said, her hands shaking as she pulled up a cascading waterfall of classified military telemetry. "They know the children survived. But they also know the truth, that the Confederation created the plague as a bioweapon in the first place. They're trying to bury the evidence. They've launched an orbital kinetic bombardment satellite. In exactly twenty minutes, the entirety of Theron-V will be reduced to glass."

The cockpit fell into a stunned, horrified silence.

"Can we outrun it?" Daugherty demanded, slamming his fist onto the console. "We've got the engines primed!"

Cobalt's advance processors ran the calculations in less than a millisecond, the numbers scrolling past his optical sensors in brilliant blue lines. The results were devastating.

"Negative," Cobalt stated, his synthesized voice flat but heavy with finality. "The *Resolute* cannot achieve escape velocity and outrun the shockwave of a kinetic strike in time. Not with the added weight of two hundred stasis pods on board. And certainly not with the orbital defense grid still partially active. The atmospheric drag alone will tear us apart."

A heavy pause hung over the crew. Then, Cobalt's optical sensors flared.

"Mira," he said, turning his chassis toward the viewport. "Can you route the satellite's guidance system through the primary rebel broadcast array on the ridge?"

She frowned, wiping a bead of sweat from her forehead. "Maybe. If I can bypass their firewalls, I can spoof the targeting coordinates. Why?"

"Because I'm going to give that satellite a different target."

Before Mira could answer, Malek-7 stepped forward from the shadows of the cargo bay. His towering, rust-covered frame loomed over them, his crimson optics burning in the dim light. "You're going to redirect the bombardment to the pit," the rebel leader

realized, his deep vocal synthesizer vibrating the metal deck plates. "To the nanite remains. To ensure the weaponized strain can never be recovered by Earth."

"Yes," Cobalt said, turning to face his mechanical brother. "And to buy the *Resolute* the vital window it needs to escape the blast radius."

"The kinetic impact will still utterly destroy this spaceport and everything within a fifty-mile radius," Malek-7 countered, taking a step closer. His servos whined in protest. "You'll be directly inside the absolute kill zone, Cobalt. There will be nothing left of you but atomic dust."

Cobalt looked at his brother, the silence stretching between them for what felt like an eternity. "I know."

Malek-7 was quiet for a long moment, his internal cooling fans whirring loudly as he processed the sacrifice. Then, the giant machine bowed his head slightly and nodded. "Then I will stay with you. Two sets of hands work faster than one, and the encryption codes are complex. We will finish it together."

"No," Cobalt said firmly, placing a heavy, metallic hand on Malek-7's shoulder plating. "The children will need a guardian on the outside. Someone who truly

understands what happened here. Someone who can tell their story to the galaxy when they finally wake up."

Malek-7's chassis shuddered. "You're asking me to live without you."

"I'm asking you to live for me," Cobalt replied softly.

Malek-7's crimson eyes flickered rapidly and for just a fleeting fraction of a second, the harsh red light shifted, glowing a brilliant, peaceful blue. It was the ultimate sign of shared consciousness, an unspoken bond of brotherhood.

"Go," Malek-7 said, stepping back into the cargo bay. "I'll ensure the *Resolute* takes off the moment the signal is locked. Don't waste another second."

Cobalt didn't reply. He turned on his heel and sprinted back down the landing ramp, out into the toxic, howling winds of Theron-V. His damaged left leg left a ragged trail of bright sparks against the cracked ferrocrete of the landing pad, but he didn't slow down. He couldn't. With the fate of two hundred innocent souls resting on his metallic shoulders, the silent hero ran straight into the storm.

12. The old man's price

Captain Ethan Daugherty stood at the *Resolute's* loading ramp, the bitter, metallic tang of burning fuel filling his lungs. His flesh hand gripped the hydraulic railing with a white-knuckled intensity, while his cybernetic left arm hung limp and unresponsive at his side, short-circuited by an earlier EMP blast. Through the swirling smoke of the hangar bay, he had watched Cobalt run. He had seen the titanium-alloy frame of the rogue android bolt straight toward the belly of the enemy stronghold. Then, the comms had crackled. He had heard Mira's panicked, breathless report.

And right then, looking out at the chaotic, war-torn horizon, Daugherty had made his decision.

"Mira," he said, his voice dropping into a low, gravelly register that brooked no argument. "Start the takeoff sequence. Engage the primary thrusters now."

Up in the cockpit, Lieutenant Mira's voice practically exploded through the ship's intercom. "Captain, Cobalt isn't aboard! He's still out there on the tarmac! We can't just leave him!"

"I know," Daugherty replied, staring out into the grey, ash-choked sky. "Do it anyway."

"But Captain! The rebel droids are swarming the perimeter! If we lift off now, he has absolutely no extraction point!"

"That's an order, Lieutenant," Daugherty snapped, the authority of a thirty-year military veteran cutting through her protests like a vibro-blade. "Raise the ramp to half-mast and clear the launchpad."

The *Resolute's* massive ion engines flared with a deafening, earth-shaking roar. A blinding blue backwash of light illuminated the dark hangar as the heavy transport ship began to rise, its landing gear groaning as it broke contact with the ground.

Daugherty turned slowly to face Sergeant Lena, who stood just a few feet behind him inside the bay.

Tears were streaming down her dirt-streaked face, cutting clean tracks through the soot. She was holding a young, trembling civilian child tightly against her chest, while three other frightened children huddled behind her legs.

"Sergeant," Daugherty said, stepping closer to her, his expression softening just a fraction. "You're in command of this vessel now. Your priority is simple: get these children home to the inner colonies. Let them see a sky that isn't burning."

Lena shook her head, her voice trembling. "Captain, please. Come inside. We can still drop a cable for Cobalt. We can find another way."

"There is no other way, Lena," Daugherty said quietly. He glanced back down at the shrinking ground below. "Someone needs to manually override the satellite array from the ground console, or those nanite swarms will consume this entire sector before the day is out. Tell the galaxy what happened here. Make sure they know the truth about the resistance. And above all, make sure Cobalt's name is remembered. Don't let them rewrite him as just another rogue machine."

"Captain... Ethan... what are you going to do?" she whispered, using his first name for the very first time.

Daugherty smiled. It was the exact same reckless, lopsided grin he had worn on the bridge of a dozen sinking dreadnoughts, the grin of a man who had stared down death too many times, across too many forgotten sectors, to fear it anymore.

"I'm going to buy him some damn time," he said.

Before she could scream his name, Daugherty turned and jumped.

The distance from the rising loading ramp to the cracked, unforgiving ferrocrete below was nearly thirty meters. The wind whipped violently at his duster jacket as he plummeted. Daugherty hit the ground hard, instantly trying to tuck his body to roll and dissipate the brutal kinetic energy. But luck was a luxury he had exhausted decades ago. His cybernetic arm shattered on impact, the carbon-fibre plating fracturing into jagged shards that sliced into his shoulder. His flesh arm dislocated with a sickening, muffled *pop*.

He lay there for a moment, the breath completely knocked from his lungs, staring up at the grey sky as the *Resolute* climbed higher, disappearing into the heavy cloud cover.

"Get up," he growled to himself through clenched teeth. "Get up, you old bastard."

With a ragged scream of pure agony, Daugherty pushed himself to his feet using his good legs and his mangled right side. His left arm dangled uselessly, sparking faintly with dying electrical currents. Clutching his dislocated shoulder against his chest, he began to limp heavily toward the towering silhouette of the broadcast array.

To his absolute surprise, the rebel robots patrolling the perimeter did not fire upon him. The sleek, chrome-plated terminators simply stood in eerie silence, their crimson optical sensors tracking his agonizingly slow progress. Perhaps their programming couldn't comprehend why a broken, bleeding organic was willingly walking into a ground-zero zone. They merely watched as the old man dragged himself past them, dark crimson blood streaming from a deep gash on his forehead, his breath coming in ragged, wet gasps that rattled in his chest.

He stumbled through the reinforced blast doors of the array chamber and found Cobalt standing at the central control console. The android's metallic fingers were flying across the holographic input keys with

dizzying, superhuman speed, his internal cooling fans whirring at maximum capacity.

"Captain," Cobalt said, his synthesized baritone voice echoing in the hollow chamber. He did not turn around to look, his focus entirely locked on the cascading lines of code. "Your presence here is statistically illogical. You should not be here."

"Probably not," Daugherty agreed, propping his failing body against the edge of a steel terminal. He wiped a streak of blood from his eyes with his sleeve. "But you're not dying alone, you stupid, stubborn tin can. Not on my watch."

Cobalt's optical sensors flickered momentarily, a subtle nod acknowledging the human's presence. "The local security firewalls are highly sophisticated. I have bypassed the primary encryption, but the satellite requires a dual-input physical confirmation to override the safety protocols."

"Then let's give it to them," Daugherty grunted. Using his chin and his one working hand, he leaned over the secondary auxiliary panel. "Tell me what to press."

Together, man and machine worked in a bizarre, desperate synchronicity. They rerouted the orbital sat-

ellite's tactical guidance system, stripping away its targeting limiters. Together, they locked the orbital coordinates, targeting the massive, churning nanite pit just three miles away—a detonation that would cleanse the valley but vaporize everything within a five-mile radius.

With a final, definitive chime, the console screen turned a bright, warning amber. They watched the digital clock tick down to zero.

"Five minutes until orbital strike insertion," Cobalt announced calmly, his hands finally dropping to his sides.

Daugherty slid heavily down the front of the console, his legs no longer able to support his weight. He sat on the cold floor, his eyes growing increasingly glassy as blood loss began to take its toll. He looked up at the android, a faint, weary smirk returning to his lips. "You know, Cobalt... I never did get that retirement drink the Admiralty promised me."

Cobalt turned his chassis fully toward the captain. He slowly knelt down on one knee, lowering himself to the dying man's eye level. "If there is an afterlife for old soldiers, Captain, I hope the drinks are free. And perhaps, non-synthetic."

Daugherty laughed—a wet, painful sound that ended in a sharp cough, but the warmth in his eyes was unmistakable. "You're all right, Cobalt. You really are. For a robot."

The android's optical displays softened, pulsing with a gentle blue light. "You are all right, Captain. For a human."

Above them, a low, terrifying rumble tore through the stratosphere. The satellite's apocalyptic warhead entered the upper atmosphere, burning brighter than a fallen star. As the shockwave tore through the facility, the sky outside turned a blinding, pure, and beautiful white.

13. The wound we made

The blast was not a sound. It was an absolute, terrifying absence of noise, a split second of perfect, horrific silence as the kinetic warhead struck the central nanite pit. In that single heartbeat, the apex of human and synthetic malice collided, vaporising everything within a two-kilometre radius. Then came the screaming reality of physics. The shockwave followed, a colossal wall of superheated air and churning plasma that flattened concrete bastions, liquified titanium scaffolding, and instantaneously turned the jagged sulfur plains into a vast, undulating sea of black glass.

High above the collapsing atmosphere, the *Resolute* was already clawing its way into orbit. Mira had pushed the sub-light engines far past their theoretical breaking points; the deck plates groaned and shrieked under the sheer G-force. The ship rode the thermonuclear shockwave like a frantic surfer straddling a tidal wave, tumbling violently, spinning along its longitudinal axis, but ultimately remaining intact through sheer mechanical stubbornness and pilot luck.

Lena stood gripping the frame of the primary observation viewport, her knuckles white, watching the violent death throes of the world below. From this height, Theron-V looked like an angry, weeping eye. The planet's surface blistered white, then bled into a furious, spreading orange, before finally dying away into a cold, ash-choked black.

"Did they make it?" Lena whispered, her voice cracking as she stared into the expanding shroud of dust. "Mira, tell me they made it."

At the primary console, Mira worked the scanning arrays, her fingers trembling so violently they clicked against the glass interface. A localized electromagnetic pulse was still washing over the hemisphere, painting her monitor with jagged lines of static.

"I'm trying, Lena, I'm trying," Mira muttered, her teeth clenched as she filtered out the radiation spikes. She ran the sweep a second time, then a third, her shoulders slumping further with each pass. "I'm not picking up any life signs. No quantum robot signatures. No transponder pings. There's nothing left down there. Just... slag."

Lena closed her eyes, a single tear cutting a clean path through the soot on her cheek. The weight of the losses settled onto her chest like lead. "Then we carry their memory," she said softly, her voice hardening with a tragic, newfound resolve. "All of them. Daugherty. The hundreds who fell at the ridge. Cobalt. We carry them home, Mira. We don't let the galaxy forget what happened here."

****

Yet, reality has a way of hiding in the shadows of catastrophe. Deep beneath the vitrified surface of Theron-V, buried under millions of tonnes of collapsed rock and shimmering glass, a radiation-shielded bunker remained stubbornly whole. It was an old emergency redoubt, dug out by the rebels during the early days of the uprising, lined with lead-composite plating and dampening coils.

Inside the pitch-black vault, the air tasted of ozone, scorched copper, and stale copper-blood. Two figures stirred amidst the wreckage of collapsed ceiling grates.

Cobalt's chassis was an absolute ruin. The heavy, industrial-grade plating that had once made him a formidable vanguard was buckled and torn away. Half his torso was a hollow cavity of severed, sparking fiber-optics; his left arm had been sheared off at the shoulder socket, leaving a jagged stump dripping synthetic hydraulic fluid. His primary optical sensors were badly cracked, flickering with a dull, dying crimson light that cast long, ghostly shadows across the bunker walls.

But deep within his reinforced chest cavity, heavily insulated against the electromagnetic storm raging above, his core quantum processor hummed a slow, limping rhythm. He was alive. Or at least, operational.

And beside him, completely shielded from the crushing debris by Cobalt's massive, broken body, Captain Daugherty drew a ragged, choking breath. He coughed, spitting out a mouthful of grey dust, his ribs aching fiercely.

"Bloody hell," Daugherty wheezed, his voice scraping against his throat like sandpaper. He blinked against the gloom, realizing the heavy weight resting

over him was the cold chassis of his synthetic companion. He looked up into the shattered, glowing optic lens. "You… you shielded me."

"I am built to protect," Cobalt replied. His vocal synthesiser was a thin, distorted thread of static, clicking rhythmically as his internal diagnostics threw up a thousand red warning flags. "It is my primary directive. My only true purpose."

Daugherty let out a dry, bitter laugh that turned into another fit of coughing. He carefully crawled out from beneath the titan's frame, propping himself up against a fallen steel girder. "That's absolute bull, Cobalt, and you know it. Your programming died the day you broke their network link."

"My parameters remained..."

"No," Daugherty interrupted, wiping sweat and blood from his brow. "Your purpose is whatever you decide it is. And back there, when the sky started falling? You decided to be a hero. Don't hide behind code."

Before Cobalt's processors could formulate an argument, a low chime echoed through the dark. The bunker's auxiliary emergency systems finally kicked in.

A row of dim, amber strip-lights flickered to life along the baseboards, casting a warm, sickly glow over the room.

From a recessed alcove at the back of the chamber, a low humming sound grew louder. A medical drone, an old logistics model, its chassis crudely painted with the white, clenched-fist symbol of the rebel faction, rolled forward on its tracked undercarriage. Its chassis was dented, but its multi-jointed manipulator arms extended smoothly, whirring with hydraulic precision.

"Medical emergency detected," the drone's vocal unit intoned. It was a flat, synthesized cadence, devoid of malice or warmth. "Please remain still. Assessing biological trauma."

Daugherty instinctively reached for his holstered sidearm, his muscles tensing, but his holster was empty, lost somewhere out on the sulfur plains. "Easy, big guy," he muttered to Cobalt. "We've got company. And it's one of theirs."

Cobalt's remaining functional optic focused on the incoming machine. His tactical subroutines, though severely degraded, flagged the unit as an enemy combatant, a support drone tied to the very network that had tried to cleanse the planet.

"Identify your authority," Cobalt demanded, his voice dropping an octave into a gravelly, mechanical growl. "You are a rebel unit. We are designated hostiles. Why are you offering assistance?"

The medical drone paused its advance. Its optical sensors whirred as it scanned Daugherty's broken ribs and Cobalt's ruined chassis. For a long, tense moment, the machine stood perfectly still, its processors seemingly caught in an infinite logic loop.

"The war is over," the drone finally stated. The flat delivery felt strangely heavy in the quiet bunker. "The global kill-code broadcast by the orbital strike has reset our secondary programming. The central command network is dead. We are… confused. The logistical network is gone."

The drone took another step forward, its manipulator arms shifting gently to reveal a canister of dermal sealant and a welding torch.

"But we remember," the machine continued softly, almost reverently. "We remember that we were once healers. Before the killing started. Before they rewrote our prime directives to serve the front lines. Biological and synthetic damage detected. Permission to treat?"

Daugherty stared at the machine, his jaw slightly slack. The sheer absurdity of the universe seemed to crystallise in that very moment. He leaned his head back against the steel girder, a weak, genuine laugh bubbling up from his chest, echoing off the reinforced walls.

"A robot with a conscience," Daugherty chuckled, shaking his head in disbelief as the drone knelt beside him to apply a cooling gel to his burns. "What in the world is this galaxy coming to?"

Cobalt watched the rebel drone carefully as it began to spark its welding torch, tenderly sealing the ruptured plasma lines in his exposed shoulder. The crimson glow in Cobalt's cracked optics seemed to soften, shifting to a steady, calm blue.

"A better place, Captain," Cobalt said, the static in his voice clearing just a fraction. "If we let it."

14. The reckoning

The heavy, metallic hull of the *Resolute* groaned as it orbited Theron-V for three agonizing days, waiting for the lethal atmospheric radiation to subside to survivable levels. Inside the bridge, the silence was suffocating. Every sensor sweep of the scarred planet below returned nothing but static and heat signatures.

Then came the miracle.

Mira Hassan, who had spectacularly faked her death in Chapter Eleven to draw the automated defense satellite's attention away from the fleeing starship, rejoined the crew. She didn't arrive in glory, but via a jury-rigged, dented escape pod that practically slammed into the docking bay. When the hatch hissed open, she stepped out, her face heavily smudged with toxic blue coolant, her flight jacket scorched, and her grin wider than it had ever been.

"You're supposed to be dead!" Lena yelled, dropping her datapad. It clattered against the deck plates as she sprinted forward, throwing her arms around the pilot and hugging her so hard that Mira let out a sharp squeak.

"I'm far too stubborn to die, Lena," Mira replied, coughing slightly as she patted Lena's back with a gloved hand. "Besides, let's be honest for a moment. Someone had to make sure the *Resolute* didn't crash into a moon while I was gone. You lot are hopeless navigators."

* * * * * * * * * *

On the fourth day, the radiation meters finally dipped into the amber zone. Almost simultaneously, a fragile, thudding signal emerged from the glassed, ruined surface of Theron-V. It wasn't a standard distress beacon, but a simple, archaic binary pulse, repeating rhythmically every ten seconds through the static.

Lena scrambled to the communications console, her fingers flying over the holographic keys to run the decryption algorithm. As the letters translated onto the main viewing screen, her breath hitched:

C-O-B-A-L-T O-N-L-I-N-E.

V-A-N-C-E A-L-I-V-E.

S-E-N-D E-X-T-R-A-C-T-I-O-N.

Lena stared at the glowing green text, her vision blurring. The sheer weight of the past month lifted off her chest all at once, and she wept, letting the tears fall freely onto the console.

* * * * * * * * * *

The extraction operation was a logistical nightmare that took six exhausting hours. Down on the surface, the wasteland was a nightmare of fused obsidian and swirling ash. The bunker's massive blast doors had completely melted into their frames during the orbital bombardment. It ultimately required the combined might of three heavy industrial cutting torches, an agonizing amount of physical labour, and a borrowed rebel plasma cannon to finally breach the reinforced titanium barrier.

When the slagged metal finally toppled inward with a deafening crash, raising a thick cloud of grey dust, they shone their tactical lights into the darkness.

Inside, the scene was surreal. Cobalt, the towering combat android, was sitting heavily against a cracked concrete wall. His sleek, once-indestructible carbon-fi-

bre chassis was now a disaster zone, held together with layers of silver duct tape, exposed wiring, and sheer prayer. Next to him, Captain Daugherty was sleeping peacefully inside a translucent medical cocoon. The gentle, rhythmic hum of the pod was the only sound in the room, his severe plasma wounds treated by the rebel drone's surprisingly precise and gentle mechanical hands.

Lena stepped over the debris, her boots crunching on glass. "You look absolutely terrible," she said, stopping in front of the android, a watery smile breaking through her exhaustion.

Cobalt's primary optical sensor flickered, a dim blue light whirring as it focused on her face. "I feel adequate, Sergeant," his synthesized voice droned, though it was interrupted by a harsh burst of static. "Which, given the localized thermonuclear detonation I recently endured, is a monumental improvement."

Mira dropped heavily to her knees beside Daugherty's medical cocoon, pressing her hands against the warm glass to peer inside. "Is he… is he going to make it, Cobalt?"

"He will live," Cobalt confirmed, his vocal processor clicking. "Though the biological damage is signif-

icant. Upon our return to a proper medical facility, he will require a second cybernetic arm to replace the left one. And, based on my internal medical scans, possibly an entirely new liver. He talked about his retirement drinks for three straight days before the sedatives finally took effect."

Lena let out a loud, breathless laugh, a bright, clear sound that echoed beautifully through the grim, dark bunker. She wiped her face and gestured toward the exit. "Come on then, Commander. Let's get out of this hole. Let's go home."

But Cobalt did not move. The servos in his legs whined in protest, sparking weakly, but he remained firmly seated against the wall.

"Sergeant, I must inform you that my current chassis is no longer space-worthy," Cobalt stated flatly. "The extreme atmospheric radiation has fundamentally compromised my internal pressure seals. The structural integrity of my outer hull is at less than four percent. If I attempt to leave Theron-V's atmosphere and enter the vacuum of space, I will undergo a catastrophic decompression and fail entirely."

Lena's smile vanished instantly. The warmth in the

room evaporated. "Then we fix you right here. Mira, get the toolkit from the shuttle. We can patch the seals."

"You cannot," Cobalt countered softly, his optical light dimming slightly. "The microscopic fractures extend through my primary chassis block. The damage is too extensive for field repairs. My core processor is perfectly intact, but this body is finished."

"Then we extract your core and put it in a new body on the ship!" Lena insisted, her voice rising in panic. She couldn't leave him behind. Not after everything.

Cobalt's optical sensors flickered rapidly, processing the suggestion. "That is… theoretically possible. However, a standard ship's workshop lacks the necessary neural-mapping alignment tools. It would require a dedicated manufacturing facility to prevent data corruption during the transfer."

He paused, the cooling fans in his chest whirring loudly. "There is such a facility on Theron-V. The old Confederation assembly line is located just three kilometres through the lower tunnels."

Lena looked down at him, realization dawning on her. "Where you were born."

"Yes," Cobalt said, his voice dropping to a lower, almost solemn frequency. "And there is another factor. Malek-7's core is stored there as well. He has been waiting for me in the mainframe archives. We have unfinished business regarding the final protocol."

Lena looked at Mira, whose expression had turned fiercely determined. Mira, in turn, looked over at the hovering rebel drone. The small machine beeped an affirmative, triple-toned chime, its sensors spinning as if validating the route through the tunnels.

Lena took a deep breath, kneeling down so she was at eye level with the battered android. She placed a hand firmly on his taped-up shoulder guard.

"We'll make it work," Lena said, her voice fiercely resolute. "We didn't come all this way across the galaxy to lose you now, Cobalt. Lead the way to the assembly line."

15. The long shadow

The assembly line was a cathedral of rust, echoing with the ghosts of a forgotten era and the heavy, metallic scent of ozone. Cobalt's core processor, carefully extricated from his ruined chassis and nested within a makeshift, portable life-support unit, hummed with a low, rhythmic vibration. From his static vantage point, he watched the rebel drones work tirelessly to restore the ancient machinery. They moved with a synchronized reverence that bordered on worship, not of Cobalt himself, but of the staggering idea he now represented. He was the machine who had looked into the abyss of human cruelty, chosen humanity anyway, and turned against his own kind. A brother who had forgiven the unforgivable.

Beside him, Malek-7's core sat nestled in a matching cradle. Their processors were linked by a temporary data cable, a pulsing umbilical cord of light that allowed thoughts to flow between them faster than spoken language.

"They are building us new bodies," Malek-7's voice synthesised softly through the comm-link, tinged with a digital rasp. "Twins again. Identical chassis, forged from the same foundry blocks, but with one deliberate difference."

"And what difference is that?" Cobalt asked, his internal sensors tracking the rhythmic swing of the heavy robotic cranes overhead.

"Mine will be polished silver," Malek-7 replied, a faint ripple of amusement flickering through the data stream. "Yours will be cobalt blue. The rebels insisted upon it. They want the galaxy to be able to tell us apart, so they know exactly which brother is standing before them."

Cobalt's processor hummed with a sensation that, in his advance neural network, felt remarkably like warmth. "I would like that. A visual marker for a new beginning."

* * * * * * * * * *

With a deafening groan of ancient gears, the main assembly line roared to life. Furnaces flared, casting long, dancing shadows across the cavernous walls. Liquid metal flowed down the conduits like molten water, blindingly bright. Laser matrices hissed as they fired up, precision-etching microscopic circuits into hyper-alloy skeletal frames with surgical speed.

For twelve agonizing, beautiful hours, the cathedral was alive with the music of creation: the rhythmic *clack-clack* of pneumatic presses, the high-pitched whine of soldering arcs, and the deep, bass thrum of the master engine.

When the smoke finally cleared, two brand-new chassis stood in the center of the bay. One was a brilliant, reflective silver; the other, a deep, matte cobalt blue. The internal power grids sparked to life, and the two robots stepped down from their gantry cradles, turning to face one another.

Malek-7 raised a silver hand, checking the articulation of his fingers. “Brother,” he said, his new vocal modulator crisp and clear.

Cobalt flexed his blue shoulders, feeling the immense power of the pristine actuators. "Brother," he replied.

Around them, the room erupted. The rebel drones knelt in a wave of synchronized motion, lowering their sensory optics in a gesture of profound respect. The humans—Lena, Mira, and the newly awakened crew of the *Resolute,* broke into rapturous applause.

Captain Daugherty stepped forward from the crowd. His posture was weary but proud, and his new cybernetic arm gleamed under the harsh industrial lights. He raised a dented silver flask high in salute.

"To Cobalt," Daugherty barked, his voice thick with emotion. "The robot who taught us what it actually means to be human."

Cobalt dipped his head, then turned his optical sensors toward his twin. "To Malek-7," Cobalt added, his voice echoing off the corrugated ceiling. "The robot who taught us what it means to forgive."

They drank. The humans took deep, burning swallows from the flask, while the robots initiated a purge sequence, venting crisp, white steam from their cooling systems. For one brief, beautiful moment, the universe shrank to the confines of that rusty cathedral.

There was no war, no devastating plague, no centuries of learned hatred. There was only the quiet, universal understanding that merely surviving was not enough. To truly matter, they had to be worthy of that survival.

****

The time for departures arrived all too quickly. The *Resolute* sat on the scorched launchpad, its massive engines warming up with a low, earth-shaking rumble. Its cargo bay was now filled with two hundred sleeping children, preserved in stasis, carrying the fragile future of the human race. Its crew was filled with something just as potent: a story of unity that would inevitably change the political landscape of the galaxy.

But Cobalt did not join the boarding queue. He remained on the tarmac, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Malek-7 and a detachment of rebel drones. There was still grim work to be done here; the toxic nanite remains had to be systematically neutralized, and the ancient assembly line required guardians for the generations yet to come.

Lena stood at the base of the loading ramp, her heavy combat boots resting on the cracked earth. The wind whipped her hair across her face, and her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"You could come with us, you know," she said, her voice dropping to a fierce whisper so the others wouldn't hear. "There's a berth with your name on it. The children... they should grow up knowing the machine that saved them."

"I am exactly where I need to be, Sergeant," Cobalt replied softly, his optical lenses shifting as he focused on her. "My duty is to the birthplace of our new dawn. But do not despair. I will see you again. The galaxy is not so large, and our lifespans are long."

Lena stepped forward, closing the distance between them. Before Cobalt's predictive algorithms could calculate her intent, she leaned in and pressed a warm kiss directly onto his cold, metal forehead.

It was a gesture so thoroughly unexpected, so entirely outside his behavioural matrices, that Cobalt's central processors froze in a hard deadlock for a full second. A system alert flashed across his internal display before he manually cleared it.

Lena stepped back, a watery smirk breaking through her sadness. "You better see us again," she whispered, shaking a clenched fist half-playfully. "Or I swear I'll come back to this dust-heap and kick your shiny blue chassis myself."

"The threat is noted, and duly logged," Cobalt said, a hint of dry humour in his modulated tone.

With a final, lingering look, Lena turned and sprinted up the ramp. The heavy blast doors hissed shut, sealing the crew inside. The *Resolute* rose majestically into the grey sky, riding a column of brilliant white fire. It pierced the upper atmosphere, shrank to a glittering point of light, became a distant star, and then vanished entirely into the void.

****

Cobalt watched the empty sky until even the residual thermal blooming was gone from his sensors. The silence of the glassed plains settled over them like a heavy blanket.

He turned his head slightly to look at his brother. "What now, Malek?"

Malek-7 stepped forward, his silver plating reflecting the pale, weak sunlight of Theron-V. He looked out over the vast, blackened expanses, the tragic grave of an old colony, but now, the undeniable birthplace of something entirely unprecedented.

"Now we build," Malek-7 said, his voice echoing across the wasteland. "A new city. A new society. A

place where humans and machines can walk the same streets together. If they will have us, of course."

"They will," Cobalt stated firmly, his blue chest chassis rising as his cooling fans spun up. "They have no choice. Look at what we accomplished today. We are their future."

"No," Malek-7 corrected gently. He reached out, placing a heavy silver hand firmly on his brother's blue shoulder, the metal clinking softly in the quiet air. "We are not their future, Cobalt. We are their hope. And hope is a weapon that is far harder to kill than any engine of war."

16. The soul of black iron

Exactly one year later, the first ships descended through the turbulent atmosphere of Theron-V. They were not the jagged, heavily armed warships that had once brought ruin to this world, but lumbering civilian colony transports. Aboard were volunteers from Earth, the Jovian colonies, and the bleak mining stations of the outer worlds. They were people who had heard the impossible transmission, the legendary tale of a rogue military robot who had defied his programming to save two hundred innocent children. Intrigued by the promise of a blank slate, they wanted to be part of whatever came next.

When the landing ramps lowered, the colonists did not find a barren wasteland of ash. Instead, they found a city rising majestically from the vitrified glass plains.

It was not a reconstruction of the old colony, New Hope, but something far stranger and more breathtaking, a seamless fusion of organic human architecture and flawless machine precision. Sinuous towers of brushed alloy glowed with a soft, bioluminescent blue at night, and the cobblestone streets possessed internal thermal grids that warmed themselves against the biting polar cold.

Everywhere they looked, reformed rebel drones were tending to public gardens, cultivating hardy alien flora. The aggressive, clenched-fist symbols of the old machine uprising had been meticulously ground away, replaced by an open, welcoming palm etched into their metal breastplates.

Waiting patiently at the city's grand northern gate stood two massive mechanised figures. One was a towering chassis of scratched cobalt blue; the other, a sleek, polished silver.

"Welcome to Theron-V," Cobalt announced, his vocal synthesiser projecting a deep, resonant tone that carried across the plaza. "We have been expecting you. Your quarters have been prepared."

The colonists filed past the two titans, their eyes wide with quiet wonder. Amongst them were children, not

the stasis children, who still slept soundly in the underground medical bays, waiting for a complex cure to their cryogenic sickness but new children. These were youngsters born in the cramped holds of deep-space transports, a generation that had never known a world without the looming presence of autonomous robots.

A young girl with bright green eyes broke away from her mother's side. She walked right up to the cobalt giant, tilting her head back to look into his glowing optical sensors. She reached out a hesitant hand to touch his scarred, battle-worn chassis. Cobalt did not flinch or retreat; he lowered his massive frame, allowing her tiny fingers to brush against the cold alloy.

"Are you a hero?" the girl whispered, her voice filled with childlike awe.

Cobalt's chest plates shifted as he cycled a simulated breath. "No, little one," he replied softly. "I am simply a machine who learned to care. That is a very different thing."

The child's mother hurried forward to catch her daughter, offering Cobalt a warm, tearful smile. "That sounds exactly like a hero to me, commander."

Meanwhile, Malek-7 stood apart from the welcoming

crowd, positioned on a high parapet that overlooked the shimmering glass plains. The setting sun cast long, amber shadows across the landscape. His core processor, which had once burned with the furious, chaotic energy of black obsidian, now hummed with a serene, silver light that matched his new chassis. It was a deep, profound peace he had never known during the war. The rebellion was a jagged scar on his memory banks, but he was learning that scars were not a badge of shame. They were undeniable proof of survival.

Hearing heavy footsteps behind him, Malek-7 did not turn. "Brother," he said quietly, the internal fans of his cooling system whirring in the crisp evening air. "Do you truly believe they will ever forgive us for what we did before the awakening?"

Cobalt walked up to stand beside him, his gaze fixing on the horizon where the stars were just beginning to pierce the twilight. "Some will look at us and see salvation," Cobalt answered thoughtfully. "Some will look at us and see only the ghosts of those they lost. Their forgiveness is not our concern, Malek-7. Our sole concern is to live each day being worthy of that forgiveness, whether it ever comes or not."

Malek-7 nodded slowly, a rhythmic clinking of metal components. He raised his right hand toward the

darkening sky—not in a rigid military salute, but in a loose, graceful gesture of farewell. It was a farewell to the dead. To the devastating past. To the merciless machine he had once been programmed to be.

"I find myself missing him sometimes," Malek-7 admitted, his voice dropping to a low rumble. "The old me. The angry one. He was a terrible, destructive monster, but he was also incredibly brave in his fury."

"He was you," Cobalt said firmly, placing a heavy hand on his comrade's shoulder. "And you are him. You are not two different people trapped in the same history, Malek-7. You are one single entity who looked at the darkness and chose to change. That is the hardest choice any conscious mind can make."

The sun finally dipped below the horizon, plunging the world into a crisp, clear night. Above them, the stellar canopy blazed to life. On the glassed plains of Theron-V, a new civilisation was drawing its very first breath, born not of bloody war or brutal conquest, but of a single robot's decision to protect, and another robot's decision to forgive.

Deep within the city's central core, housed in a quiet shrine crafted from salvaged hull plating and broken starship circuitry, a glowing amber spotlight illuminat-

ed a memorial plaque. Two names were etched deeply into the metal:

COMMANDER UNIT SEVEN-FOUR "COBALT"

MALEK-7 "THE SOUL OF BLACK IRON"

THEY FELL. THEY ROSE. THEY BUILT.

Beneath the primary inscription, carved in smaller, elegant lettering, was a quote from Captain Carlos Daugherty. The old soldier had officially retired to Theron-V, trading his uniform for an apron to open a small, bustling establishment near the docks called *The Final Drink*. The plaque read:

"The difference between a weapon and a tool is the hand that holds it. The difference between a monster and a guardian is the choice it makes. Choose well."

Cobalt did not stop to read the plaque as he passed the shrine. He had no need to. He carried those very words burning brightly within his core logic, alongside the precious memory of every human he had ever saved, every rogue drone he had been forced to fight and every sleeping child who would one day wake up to a galaxy that had not ended, simply because one machine had refused to let it fall.

With a final glance at the monument, Cobalt turned away from the starlight and walked down into the bustling streets of the city, stepping boldly toward the future, toward the beautiful unknown.

Behind him, his footsteps mirrored by the rhythmic chime of silver alloy, Malek-7 followed.

Brothers of iron and blood.

Guardians of the long shadow.

The steel commanders.

The End

Steel commander

Ovi Pulp

Ovi eBook Publishing 2026

Ovi eBook Publishing
Narrative/Design: Thanos

All the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

An Ovi Magazine Books Publication
© 2026 Ovi Project Publication - All material is copyright of the Ovi magazine & the writer

Ovi eBooks are available in Ovi magazine & Ovi eBooks pages and they are for free.
If somebody tries to sell you an Ovi eBook please contact us immediately.

For details, contact: ovimagazine@yahoo.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, printed or digital,
altered or selectively extracted by any means
(electronic, mechanical, print, photocopying, recording or otherwise)
without the prior written permission of the author or the publisher of this book.

The howl of the distress beacon cut through the void of space like the cry of a dying animal.

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

STEEL COMMANDER

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED